WOMEN BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

1750–1936

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This book was written in 1978 and published in 2017.

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Introduction

This essay is about the history of female blue collar workers in the United States between colonial times and the 1930s. Although there has been some writing on clerical and service workers, and a substantial amount of written material on professional women, writers in the social sciences have almost totally neglected women factory workers.[1] Women were the first group to enter factories when textile mills were introduced in the New England states in the 1820s. Before the great Irish immigration of the 1840s, American-born women were the vast majority in the textile mills until they were gradually replaced by male and female immigrants.

Right from the beginning, that is, soon after they became established as mill workers, women fought to improve their working conditions, both through political and economic action. Politically, they joined male workers in attempting to influence state legislatures to pass protective labour legislation and, economically, they tried either to form trade unions of their own or join male unions. In both courses of action, women were at an extreme disadvantage. In seeking protective labour legislation, they attempted to influence legislatures, although they did not yet have the vote. In attempting to form unions, they came into direct conflict with skilled male workers who were completely unwilling to have their skilled labour monopoly weakened by an influx of unskilled women. Although at times they were aided by men who were genuinely concerned to help them, very often women were made beneficiaries of protective labour legislation for women only, whose effect was to keep them from competing

with male workers, or given union membership for the sole purpose of preventing them from undercutting male workers.

For both male and female workers, the history of trade unions and protective labour legislation is intertwined. Some groups of male workers, for example, miners and railroad workers, with both the vote and strong unions behind them, were easily able to obtain legislation regarding hours and safety standards. Women workers, however, who had to work –for the most part–without benefits, and deprived of unions, fought for protective labour legislation on the very grounds upon which anti-female discrimination rested; namely, on the notion that women were both physically and morally fragile, and that their role as wives and mothers was jeopardized by their working outside of the home.

Since working conditions for women were so horrendous, women were happy to achieve legislation, say, restricting them from night work or from certain hazardous occupations altogether, in the hopes of improving their working conditions. In doing so, they joined male workers who sought this same protective legislation–for women only–for their own cynical purposes and, in the process, helped legislate many women out of good jobs, for example, in printing, where night work was required.

Underlying both economic (unions) and political (legislation) actions were a number of ideological factors. First, both men and women tended to doubt the appropriateness of women working outside the home. Second, the deeply-rooted view of women's inferiority carried over to the workplace so that when women did work, it was very difficult to convince anyone, including women themselves, that their work was worth very much, even when they did work that was the same or more difficult than that done

by men. Third, throughout the nineteenth century there was a commitment to laissez-faire doctrines, which minimized the role of the State in correcting economic and social inequities and a commitment to the concept of "freedom of contract." Thus, union strength was often eroded by laws prohibiting strikes or boycotts, construed as a restraint of trade, and protective labour legislation was often revoked by the courts as a violation of freedom of contract. Fourth, for a long time, unions themselves, under the American Federation of Labor, adopted the prevailing business ethic. They favored voluntarism and opposed both protective labour legislation and social welfare legislation by the State. They felt that if workers received benefits from the State, union loyalty would be undermined.

These conflicts reflected, in turn, a larger philosophical difference between those who felt that society was composed of free, independent competing individuals, or by a number of groups, some of which suffered disadvantages best dealt with through the intervention of the State. In general, disadvantaged groups adhere to the latter point of view, as do socialists, but as noted in this essay, socialism was not to survive as a viable political force in the United States. Also, women very often sought advancement or protection by using arguments based on the idea that women were in some way inferior or unequal to men. In this way, women succeeded in obtaining protective labour legislation whose immediate aim was to improve their working conditions, but whose long-range effect was to buttress the very notions of inequality that have kept women from competing in the economy.

Today, the controversy surrounding the *Equal Rights Amendment* is a case in point. On the one hand, there are those who say that

once legal economic disabilities are removed, women will do as well, economically, as men. Then there are others, especially working class women employed in factories, farms and in service work, who feel that they need to be protected from various hazards. The best solution to this controversy, of course, is humane working conditions in every field, for both men and women, so that legislation does not succeed, as in the past, in dividing workers.

Legislation, union organization, and ideological conflict took place in an historical context not only of progressive concern with social welfare, but in an economy whose expansion or contraction either mitigated or exacerbated views deleterious to working women. Thus economic depressions have forced women who might otherwise not have worked, into the labour force, and wars–beginning with the United States Civil War–have opened up new occupations for them. During wartime, notions regarding the inappropriateness of women working were temporarily pushed aside, while during depressions and recessions, the usual resistance to women working reappeared in its most virulent form, when women were accused of taking badly-needed jobs from men who had to support families. Although especially during depressions, a very large proportion of women in the labour force were heads of households, during depressions, women were doubly vulnerable, suffering both the general effects of a bad economy and sexual discrimination.

Women's collective efforts, like those of men, were weakened further by ethnic and cultural differences. For example, employers very often played one group off against another, balancing off in their workforce certain groups like the English–who had a reputation for causing trouble, demanding high wages

for little work–with other groups; for example, Poles, who had a reputation for being willing to work as strikebreakers. In addition to general ethnic conflict, women–unlike men–were further subject to their own ethnic group's views towards women working. Thus, in certain ethnic groups, where the need for women to work was greatest, notions regarding the inappropriateness of women working outside the home were most detrimental to the formation of unions or other organizations representing women's economic interests. Thus, here too, women were doubly vulnerable as members of ethnic groups, and as women. Gradually, women become increasingly divided by education, so that the goals of educated women were often different from those of the less educated.

Finally, the essay looks at the changing structure of the female labour force as modern economic and political organization created a demand for white collar workers. Clerical, as well as various professionals such as teachers, nurses and librarians have formed a female occupational ghetto, which suffers (except lately with the advent of professional unions) from low pay, boring routine and lack of advancement opportunity. As an alternative to factory work, it was considered an improvement for women until recently when women have come to realize that they must not compare their jobs to those of their less fortunate sisters, but to men's jobs. Preoccupation with all levels of white collar work for women, however, has surely obscured the fact that many women are still blue collar workers. There is now a growing realization that some of the best paid and most secure jobs in the economy are blue collar jobs, and that through the opening of apprenticeship programs to women, some of the overcrowding in the white collar occupational ghetto may be relieved.

This essay concludes with a brief discussion of the social legislation passed during the 1930s in the first two Roosevelt administrations. While this is often seen by historians as a great watershed in American history, a closer look reveals that in many ways women still faced many of the same problems with regard to their labour force participation.

In my view, the best explanation lies in viewing the position of women as a culmination of events in social and economic history. In view of this, it is necessary to embark on more intensive inquiries, in greater depth, into many of the issues touched on only briefly in this essay.

It would have been interesting, but beyond the scope of this limited historical study of blue collar women workers, to examine women's roles within the family, both pre-industrial and industrial, to see what changes in the family accompanied industrialization and how this affected women. This essay examines the family to the extent of pointing out that in colonial times there was no conflict between the feminine role and women working. Women were expected to work, and their labour was absolutely necessary to produce either goods needed by the family or goods sold to others to enable the family to accumulate surplus, which enabled them to buy things the family could not produce. I have also noted that ethnicity determined the family's view of women working, that is, determined the place where women might work within or outside the home, but nevertheless, most ethnic groups expected women to work.

Generally, there is a great deal of controversy about the nature of the pre-industrial family and women's roles within it. The Marxist view tends to see the emergence of the factory as one of the chief causes for the breakdown of the family as an economic

unit comprised of interdependent family members.[2] For women, the result of the introduction of the factory system was that products formerly produced at home began to be produced in the factory, and items formerly valued for their use began to be valued for their commodity value in the market. Not only goods but even services previously rendered at home, such as the education of children, were moved out of the home to the public sphere. The prestige of women who remained at home, and the work done there, declined drastically. Some middle class women, however, began to view their roles as consumers and guardians of moral and social values, rather than as producers. Working class women, however, very often had to leave the home out of dire necessity, and do work that was formerly done at home, in the factory. Thus, working class and middle class women inhabiting different worlds had little in common.

A non-Marxist view of the family holds that cultural values and views towards women working simply carried over from a pre-industrial to an industrial society[3]. Thus, one might emphasize the fact that in pre-industrial times, family women and men were expected to work, and very often had to leave their homes to do so. For example, boys went to other establishments to apprentice, and girls to be domestic servants. In other words, a non-Marxist view might emphasize the continuum in values and in the family even with the introduction of the factory. Tilly and Scott note that working women from peasant classes held jobs as domestic servants in garment-making and in the textile industry. They maintain that when rural families in Europe sent their daughters to work in factories, there was no break in long-held values regarding women working, but that the factory simply provided an additional job opportunity.

This recognition of the values held by the family is what led to the establishment of the "Lowell system" as described in my essay and also to the family system in Rhode Island where, in order to maintain control over workers, factory owners hired whole families. The latter practice, of course, was copied from the English practice.

According to Tilly and Scott, it was not only the introduction of the factory which led to changes in the family and changes in women's work patterns. They note that one must take account of job opportunities, increased wages for men which may have allowed women to remain at home, the spread of bourgeois values, ethnic variations, and different rates of economic development for various geographic areas. At any rate, Tilly and Scott caution against the notion of an abstracted pre-industrial or industrial family and recommend in-depth studies of particular times and places.

Whether changes in work patterns, brought about by industrialization, rendered the family more or less economically vulnerable has to be explored for each area in each time period. There was no clear break between rural and urban life in the early industrial period. Both in Europe and in the United States, as Smuts points out, cities had a rural flavor and families still had kitchen gardens and kept chickens.[4] Even without this rural holdover, it remains to be proven, in the American context, whether an urban life, with economic dependence upon the factory and the vicissitudes of working there represented an advance of a strictly rural life with no possibilities of industrial work. Certainly the experience of most immigrants to America seems to indicate that aside from opportunities represented by abundant farmland, cities, too, were "paved with gold" in the

sense that economic opportunities and cooperation among individuals of various ethnic groups made life vastly better, whatever the character of family life.

Considerations of the family aside, it is not completely clear whether women's work in the labour force represents an advantage for them or a further burden or degradation. One can view this problem with objectivity, using criteria which the individual woman may not accept. For example, we may tell a woman that it is much more creative, worthwhile, and fulfilling to stay at home and raise children than to be a file clerk. Or we may view the issue from the woman's point of view which is that many of society's most boring, menial jobs are preferable to housework, especially in view of the fact that paid work gives women a certain sense of independence. Most studies of blue collar families indicate the importance of women's earning capacity in shifting the balance of power in the working-class family.

Beyond this, one could study women's participation in the labour force from "the top "down" instead of from "the bottom up," as I have tried to do, and examine the functions of women's work for the economy. In this study which is concerned mainly with women's view of their own options, and the way they negotiated their role with unions and with legislatures, I have not dealt with this to any great extent. Not only can one view women as a "reserve army of labour" to be called upon in times of need, as in wartime, and then dismissed, but one can also conceive of a woman's role in the labour force as a permanent reserve army of those who take the unskilled jobs, the most routine white collar jobs, the lowest-paid assembly line work – primarily non-union jobs or crowed themselves into a few professions so that these

too become worth less in the eyes of society[5]. Also, one can view women workers as comprising the sector of the economy that bears the brunt of unemployment in times of recession.

The fact of labour market segmentation or women's crowding into certain professions, such as teaching or other low-paid female jobs (that is, job categories which are close to 100% female) is today the central issue to be considered concerning women's labour market participation.

The most obvious explanation for the inferior position of women in the labour market is that–until recently–women suffered a great labour market disability because of pregnancy and childrearing. Some have suggested that women themselves, in certain periods, desired labour market segregation and that they preferred to avoid certain types of work. For example, in rural areas women were pleased to be restricted to house work and avoid field work. Of course, women who were past child-bearing suffered from labour market segmentation along with those who were of child-bearing age.

Another explanation is that women differ in muscular strength and in various aptitudes. A commonplace notion is that women have great dexterity and patience in doing routine work. Female socialization and educational opportunities led women to certain jobs that were viewed as extensions of their nurturing role within the family, e.g., nursing or factory work consisting of tasks traditionally done at home.

Beyond this, another explanation for the subordinate position of women in the labour market is that this was a result of the women's subordinate position in a patriarchal family and the result of a complex of institutions, including the law, all of which

viewed women as inferior[6]. In many cases, women were excluded from certain jobs by law or by professional fiat, or were denied access to the education necessary to practice a certain profession. Some writers have noted that technology pushed women, who were unable to attain apprenticeships, into certain unskilled industrial areas.[7] The role of technology is dealt with more fully in this essay.

Further, the position of women in the labour force, especially blue collar workers, can be explained to a very large extent by the fate women met at the hands of male trade unions which met the threat of female competition through a number of devices, including the advocacy of protective legislation. Some also feel that it suited employers to retain women as a cheap labour reserve that could provide strikebreakers in times of strikes.

Aside from the foregoing explanations, which are by no means exhaustive, economists have explored the question in detail.[8] Economists focus on women's productivity, their human capital investment (education), employers' unfettered control over wages and working conditions, the dual labour market and overcrowding. Until there is a perfect competition in the labour market, we will never really know the true desires of women in this respect: how many would be engineers and how many prefer teaching or sewing?

One fact is abundantly clear however: the fiction that blue-collar women's work is ever optional is probably less true today than it ever was. Blue-collar women workers work out of dire necessity either to support their families or to supplement inadequate family income.

Chapter 1

Factory Work - From Idyll to Nightmare, 1750–1850

Pre-Industrial Paternalism and Workers' Solidarity

Women's work in manufacturing in the United States has a long history. As far back as 1750, cottage industry was widespread in New England[9] and by 1775 women were employed in the first widespread use of spinning jennies (a multi-spindle spinning frame invented in 1764).[10] In this primarily agricultural society, women's industrial work was looked upon favorably. In his *Report on Manufactures,* Alexander Hamilton placated farmers who were afraid that their workforce would be drawn into factories by noting that women and children on farms were less productive than men and likely to be idle.[11] By engaging in manufacturing, he noted, they were not only helping their families, but were vastly increasing the wealth of the nation.

Increasingly, in the 1820s and 1830s, New England farms suffering from rocky soil and a harsh climate, were unable to sustain entire families. It was common for daughters to seek work away from their own farms, either as farm labourers or as domestic servants. These occupations entailed long hours, heavy work, and a considerable loss of freedom and independence, so that it is not surprising to find that by 1820 factory work was seen as a very attractive alternative.

Although early mills in Rhode Island were organized under the family system where entire families were hired and fired

together, and housed in company-owned accommodation, a very harsh system; in Massachusetts mills were run under what was known as the "Lowell System." In order to attract female workers whose families were aware of the misery and degradation of women workers in England, factory owners housed them in dormitories and enforced a strict moral code. Women had to be in by ten, could not entertain men, and had to attend church services on Sundays. The result was that parents could send their daughters to work in such factories with peace of mind. Not only were these women able to accumulate savings which gave them an inestimable sense of independence, but the dormitory which housed their peers, even if under the watchful eye of the matron, made them feel freer than they would have felt at home. Here, their few hours not spent working – and they were very few, perhaps three each day – could be used to attend lectures or night school.

Factory work, itself, although necessitating very long hours, was much less physically taxing then either domestic service or farm labour. Machines could be left unattended for long periods, the factories themselves were located in lovely rural settings, and best of all, there was the camaraderie and community of other women.[12] At any rate, the women saw factory work not as a permanent condition, but as an interlude before marriage. Estimates of the time women spent in the workforce ranged from three to thirteen years, but the average estimate is from three to five years.

By 1834, however, due to increased competition from other mills and to a speeding up of the work process through an introduction of new machinery, mill owners found it necessary to cut wages. In Lowell, this resulted in a "turn out" or strike by female

workers. This was by no means the first strike by women since one had occurred in 1824 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and a major strike of 400 female workers took place in Dover, New Hampshire in 1828.

It seems to me that more important than whether these strikes were successful or not – and they usually were unsuccessful – is the fact that "turn outs" occurred without the benefit of a union. For workers, the *sine qua non* of strike activity is not a union, but a sense of solidarity and a common understanding of the injustice they suffered. Lowell workers had this sense of solidarity to a remarkable extent.[13]

Lowell textile workers were an extremely homogenous workforce; most were unmarried, US-born, white American Christians, and 80% were between the ages of fifteen and thirty. They boarded together in rooming houses where peer pressure, as much as any direction from superiors, dictated behavior. In addition to their housing, work patterns also contributed to a sense of community. For example, when they first came to the mill, they were put to work as "spare" hands under the direction of another worker, filling in wherever they were needed. When a place at a loom became vacant they would fill it, once sufficiently experienced, but even then would work in pairs. This pairing of workers enabled the mill to function more efficiently, counteracting the disruptive effect of workers coming and going, but also helped the operatives as well. Through work sharing, they were able to assume the tasks of workers who were off sick, thus saving their jobs for them, or giving other workers a few desperately needed hours off the job.[14] Additional factors contributing to their sense of community were their Christianity and morality, and their sense of equality and independence

inherited from the American Revolution to which they often referred.

Militancy and Political Action

In this period, factory work gave women a measure of independence from their families because their pay was sufficient to allow savings. In turn, savings gave women workers certain options; for example, they could remain away from their home if they wished, or they could stop working at the mill. Due to increased competition between mills, however, in 1834, mill owners were forced to drastically cut workers' pay. Workers felt trapped and enslaved by low wages, which no longer allowed them to put anything aside. Realizing that one of the problems women workers receiving low pay had was lack of money to pay for their transportation home, striking workers took a pledge that would supply fare to any worker who did not wish to remain and strike and who preferred to return home.[15]

Thus having achieved some economic and social independence, and a high degree of solidarity as workers, most of these women who were experiencing deteriorating factory conditions chose to stay and fight rather than to leave the factory, although they still had the option to leave. In Marxist terms one can interpret worker dissatisfaction with working conditions as an example of the working out of class conflict, or one can take account of the fact that despite its drawbacks, women still found factory work preferable to the alternatives available to them outside the factory – farm labour or domestic service.

In 1836, female workers in Lowell had another "turn out." Whereas 800 had turned out in an unorganized fashion in 1834, 1500 turned out in 1836 and this time their strike activities were

coordinated by the newly-founded Factory Girls' Association (FGA) One tactic was to completely halt the operation of a specific task in a mill, such as warm spinning or stretching, effectively causing the entire mill to cease operation. Eventually, the FGA had a membership of 2500 operatives.

Industrialization and Immigration

By the late 1830s, the mood of factory work had changed and was no longer an idyllic interlude before marriage. Between 1837 and 1843 there was a depression during which family farms in New England could not withstand competition from western farms. Women were now forced into factory work and suffered pay cuts without protest. Technological changes in machinery required greater skill and discipline in tending machines and the whole work process was speeded up. Instead of the previously rather relaxed atmosphere, discipline was now required, in surroundings which were now hotter, noisier, and dirtier. Tuberculosis and pneumonia were rampant.[16] Finally, the situation was further complicated by the fact that US-born women had to compete for jobs with immigrants from Ireland, both male and female, who were only too glad to put up with any type of working conditions and who regarded factory work as lifetime necessity rather than merely as an interlude before marriage.

By 1845 prosperity had returned and production expanded. There were renewed labour protests, but now they did not consist of turnouts, but rather of campaigns for the ten-hour day. A group of Lowell workers led by Sarah G. Bagley, a skilled weaver, formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.[17] The association was affiliated with the New England Workingmen's Association but was autonomous, electing female officers.

Reform associations – at least six of them – were scattered throughout New England. They published a newspaper called *Voice of Industry* to keep all reform associations and affiliated unions informed of the progress of the Ten Hour Movements.

Unlike previous labour protests consisting of spontaneous and mostly unsuccessful strikes resulting in the blacklisting of strike leaders, the current protest was political. Workers were now facing speed-ups, made possible by the introduction of new machinery, wage cuts, and stretch-outs (employers doubling the workload while reducing pay). The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA) attempted to educate its members about social and factory conditions, to undertake studies, and finally to petition the legislature for a ten-hour (workday) law. In accordance with these goals, they published documents called Factory Tracts and presented petitions to the state legislature, which at their height in 1845 and 1846, contained as many as 5000 signatures, prompting the first governmental investigation into factory conditions.[18]

An interesting aspect of the Ten Hour Movement mounted by the textile workers is that it involved the cooperation of men and women. Although in this period women comprised 69% of the workers in Lowell's textile mills, men had the vote that was crucial since this was a political struggle.

According to one writer, how men regarded working women depended upon the number of women in a particular craft.[19] Where women were already well established in a craft, men encouraged their organizing, but where they threatened to enter a previously all-male craft, they faced overt male hostility. Female textile mill workers had support since women had not only been in the mills from the start, but formed the vast majority of mill

workers. However, Wertheimer notes the basic feeling of men that the employment of women and children in the mills was "a servitude degrading to the American character." They hoped that someday women would be found working only in the home. Although their dislike of women working was partly due to their longstanding fear of losing their skilled jobs to women and of having their wages cut; since women would work for less, women working also meant chaos in their family life. Women in factories, unable to care for home and children, meant workingmen whose wages were too low to support a family, and a kind of total servitude to the capitalist enterprise. Male opposition to female competition was expressed in 1839 by the National Trades Union. They noted that female completion was

> …the most disgraceful escutcheon on the Character of American freemen, and one, (which) if not checked by some superior cause, will entail ignorance, misery and degradation on our children to the end of time.[20]

After repeated failure by the LFLRA and other groups working for the ten hour day, the first law regulating hours of work was passed by the State of New Hampshire in 1847. Like most hours laws subsequently passed by various states, this was a poor one from the point of view of workers, since it contained a loophole allowing an employer to bypass the regulation by specific contract with a worker. Thus the law did not prevent a worker who badly needed a job from being pressured by the employer to agree to work longer hours. At this stage in American judicial history, freedom of contract was considered an inalienable right

and was used as a handy device to crush labour legislation for the next fifty years.

In the 1840s, Irish immigrants began streaming into the country just when vast numbers of unskilled workers were needed for large production requirements. Between 1840 and 1850, two million Irish immigrants, twice the number of all immigrants that came between 1775 and 1825, arrived.[21] Soon, American-born women who had previously formed the vast majority of textile workers (90% in 1828) now formed 69% in 1848. The strength of the female labour movement was thus strongly undermined.

Upward Mobility of American-born Women

Other factors also served to weaken the representation of American-born women in factories. First, due to a decline in fertility in the previous generation, there were an insufficient number of American-born women to meet the expanding demand for unskilled labour. Second, American-born women had a number of other options; the forties was a period of westward expansion and many women were marrying farmers and moving west. Growing cities provided women with a variety of jobs that were non-existent in 1821. Shops, taverns and inns provided work for women, as did journalism, which was a very popular profession. Also, any married woman was usually engaged to some extent in whatever trade her husband followed, taking it over entirely if he died.

Since the country had been growing increasingly prosperous, women had been staying in school longer and longer, until they had become more highly educated, on the whole, than men. Increased education had several effects: it drastically reduced the number of years before marriage in which women were available

to work (assuming the age of marriage remained the same) and it also rendered less suitable some of the rougher or more menial jobs which women did. Thus education created a class of women who needed some sort of genteel profession and this professional opportunity arose for them as early as the 1830s in the form of public school teaching and, later, in the 1850s with the opening, to a small extent, of other professions.

One reason for the rise of public schools was that artisans had pressured local government to provide free public education for their children so they might compete on a more equal basis with wealthier individuals.[22]

Summary

Women began as factory workers in the United States, spirited and hopeful of getting ahead, mindful that they were free daughters of the American Revolution and not wage slaves. Taking textile mills in New England as an example, we note that for a short time they benefited from the cynical paternalism of factory owners whose primary objective in providing workers with good living conditions was to get women off the farm and into factories. Housed together and working together, women developed a strong sense of community and reacted collectively to changing work conditions. When strikes proved unsuccessful, women turned, with the help of male workers, to political action. Although successful in finally achieving a ten-hour law, they were defeated in a number of court cases in which the court upheld the primacy of Constitutional protection of freedom of contract. Finally, opportunities for going west or for engaging in other occupations lessened their numerical representation in the mills and they were eventually replaced by an immigrant workforce – male and female.

The departure of American-born women from the factories, and the end of organizations such as the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association meant also the end of a shared understanding of work experience. Woman learned in the textile factory and lost also a network of organizations, newspapers, personal relationships– that is, all the accumulated experience and skills involved in union organization and political action. Immigration had completely undermined attempts by women workers to form unions. Politically, whatever influence these women had achieved with legislatures, whatever sympathies established between skilled and unskilled worker, between male and female workers, and between workers and the middle class public had to be reestablished in the future by another group of women workers– ill-educated and poverty stricken immigrant women.

The fight begun by the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association for unions and for protective labour legislation had to be carried on in mid-century by immigrant women. This period, one of despotic laissez-faire capitalism was a dismal one in which to attempt to achieve these goals. Not only did workers face harsh opposition from factory owners who opposed unions, but they attempted to obtain a political goal, protective legislation, without the vote. Later in the middle of the nineteenth century, these disenfranchised immigrant women were given an immense boost by an alliance with reform-minded middle class women who helped them in their battle for a number of objectives – the vote, protective legislation and trade unions.

Chapter 2

Women Workers in an Urban Class Society, 1850–1865

By the 1850s the United States had become a class society. In the middle and upper middle classes, described later by Veblen as "the leisure class," saw women as ornaments or symbols of virtue and purity. However, these strata also produced a number of women who wish to break out of the social, economic and political trap they were in and they wished to help working women as well. In this period women were not only constrained by their clothing: corsets, bustles, and long skirts, but by restrictive notions of the female role; a double sexual standard; lack of legal control over property or custody of children. Further, they had no prospect of changing their legal status, since they did not have the vote.

The Great Alliance

Thus in 1848, a number middle-class and working-class women met in Seneca Falls, New York to discuss not only voting and property rights, but also how they could achieve equal opportunity with men in various trades, professions, and in commerce.[23] Many of the middle class women at this convention had experience in the abolition movement. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, prominent suffragists, had both attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England in 1840 which had refused to seat women among the male delegates. It

took little imagination for these women to realize the analogous position of women and slaves, and they vented their outrage accordingly.

Voting rights were not the only topic discussed at the Seneca Falls Convention, also discussed were property rights and the possibility of protective legislation for women workers. At the outset, a contradiction was noted in this proposition; either women were to be equal with men in every respect, or they were to be viewed as more physically delicate or morally fragile than men and thus in need of special legislation. Working women like Sarah Bagley and Huldah Stone (of the LFLRA) however, interested in bread and butter issues, firmly rejected notions that women were the guardians of moral virtue and physically frail and passive. Bagley and Stone felt that protective legislation was based on middle class assumptions regarding the nature of women, and that this legislation would be used in a discriminatory fashion in order to keep women from earning a decent living.[24]

It is not possible to dismiss the issue of who was right and who was wrong in this matter of protective legislation. The battle over protective legislation raged. Bagley and Stone were later proven correct in their prediction– protective legislation was used to keep women out of certain trades. Later in this essay, we shall note that women accepted protective legislation, despite its drawbacks. To this day, since there is inadequate health and safety legislation for all workers, many fall on entreaties for special protective legislation for women, since they are potential mothers.[25]

In 1848, since working conditions for women in certain industries were so bad and since women were not unionized, to most

women protective legislation for women seemed as morally justified as the abolition of slavery. In a period when many men already had the ten hour day and reasonably good pay, most women worked from ten to thirteen hours a day at pay below subsistence level.

In this period, the unions viewed themselves as voluntaristic organizations of powerful and free workers able to protect themselves against employers. Certainly Bagley and Stone, as union agitators, were in this mold. It probably would have been better for women and for workers of both sexes had they been able to form strong unions and to achieve decent pay and working conditions without the intervention of the State, but while unskilled men had a very difficult time organizing and maintaining effective unions, for women in this period of achievement of unions was an almost totally unfulfilled dream. Thus, protective legislation was necessary to keep women from exploitation that has been aptly compared to that of slavery.

Female Workers versus Male

The introduction of technology always held the threat that a complex skilled task might be broken down into a number of simple operations and given to unskilled women who would work for very low pay. Thus, in the 1850s when technological changes such as the introduction of the steam-powered sewing machine had the effect of taking women out of their homes and into sweatshops, unions felt quite threatened by hordes of unskilled women workers. William Sylvis, the head of the National Labor Union, pledged his union to support equal pay for equal work. Various craft unions federated with the National Labor Union, such as the cigar makers and typographers, began to accept women into their unions. Those women who were

accepted were skilled; this left the problem of what to do with the hordes of unskilled women whom craft unions were loath to accept.

To many unionists, protective legislation appeared to be the ideal device to keep unskilled women from taking men's jobs. President Strasser of the Cigar makers said,

> We cannot drive the females out of the trade, but we can restrict this daily quota of labour through factory laws. No girl under 18 should be employed more than eight hours per day; all overwork should be prohibited; white married women should be kept out of factories six weeks before and six weeks after confinement.[26]

Protective legislation–had it been forced–would probably have aided the overwhelming majority of women, but a minority of professional women, or women in trades such as typography, where print for newspapers was set at night, were legislated out of good jobs.

By 1869, the women's suffrage movement was split into two wings: the moderate Bostonian faction, led by Lucy Stone and Julia Ward, chose to restrict itself to obtaining political rights for women, while the more radical National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, wanted to help the female labourer as well. This divergence in strategy persisted and only ended when the vote was obtained in the twentieth century.[27]

The moderate faction felt that once they achieved the vote, women would go on to force legislators to shape society in directions they wished. Behind this view was the assumption that women–being somehow better than men–would use their votes to form a better society. The opposing radical view–ultimately correct–was that, while the vote would make it possible for women to express their views politically and to pressure legislatures, it was necessary for politically active groups of women to keep up the pressure for specific legislation on behalf of women. The former view can be characterized as individualistic, or laissez-faire: give women the vote, equality in the marketplace, and they will make their own way; a notion that is prevalent today. The latter view can be characterized as a collective, social welfare oriented view, which maintains that some are more powerful than others in the market place and that disadvantaged groups should be protected by legislation, a view that currently might be translated into affirmative action.

For a short period, the alliance between the National Woman Suffrage Association and the National Labor Union (NLU) was really close. Anthony and Stanton were delegates at the NLU convention, and Kate Mullaney of the Troy Collar Workers Union, was elected vice-president of the NLU. Miss Anthony made a fateful mistake in this alliance; however, she paid female typographers who worked on the journal *Revolution* less than union scale in order to hire more women and also encouraged women to engage in strike breaking on the grounds that women had no other way to learn a trade. Miss Anthony was not re-elected as a delegate to the NLU convention by outraged members of the union, and this defeat marked the end of the collaboration between middle class reformers and blue collar women in the Reconstruction period, at any rate. The next period

of collaboration between middle class and working class women would take place in 1900 with the Consumers League.

Immigrant women who were industrial workers had two ways of fighting against inhumane industrial exploitation in this period; they could try to form unions and they could attempt to obtain protective legislation to improve their working conditions. For male workers, the quest for unionization and protective legislation had been intertwined since colonial days. As difficult as the struggle had been for male workers, it was vastly more difficult for female workers. Some men, at least, had unions and all had the vote; but it was union membership in the last analysis that provided for some skilled male workers excellent working conditions and high pay. Very few women workers were members of unions, and very many worked in their own homes or in sweatshops under deplorable conditions.

Although women eventually achieved some measure of success with unions and in achieving protective legislation, this was not sufficient to improve working conditions substantially for the vast majority of women who were unskilled workers. Their attempts at unionizing brought them into conflict with skilled male workers and their craft unions. Protective legislation was often slow in coming and then was often unenforced. One can make a good case for the fact that working conditions for women changed for the better with the gradual shift in the economy from heavy industry to light industry and services. It is possible to say that that being a clerk or secretary in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century was better by far than being a teacher or nurse in an earlier period, although hours–especially for clerks–were still incredibly long and pay for all women, low.

Despite the fact that ultimately women's fight to obtain unions was only marginally successful in this period, their struggle in this area had a revolutionary zeal and purpose. Most interesting of all, however, is the fact that the type of alliance begun in the 1850s between middle class suffragist women such as Elizabeth C. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and labour union women, on behalf of the latter continued well into the 1930s.

Ethnic Conflict

By the 1850s, as a result of urbanization and immigration, America had become more of a class society. Especially within the factories this change was evident. As late as the 1820s, textile factories had been suitable places for both poor and moderately well-to-do women to work. Initially then, working in the factory was not in itself evidence of the status of a woman. Gradually however, working conditions worsened due to changing technology, increased competition between mills, and the advent of immigrant women and men who were willing to put up with extremely harsh working conditions. American-born women became less desirable as employees due to the fact that they protested against exploitative conditions and, in addition, they were drawn away from the factory work by the availability of a multitude of other opportunities.

Marxists note that class is determined by the relationship of a group to the means of production. They note antagonisms between classes, especially between the working class and capitalists. At that time, however, the working class in the United States lacked both the ethnic homogeneity and the geographical stability of European working classes. Class consciousness, if it existed, was weak; each new wave of immigrants to the United States produced additional tension since

the newest immigrants provided unskilled, cheap labour which swamped and undercut the labour force already present. Those immigrants who arrived in the country first and had been in the country for several generations were skilled and, in some cases, organized into craft unions.

Thus, in the United States, ethnicity and class conflict were superimposed. Very often a dispute between skilled and unskilled workers in a particular trade involved conflict between two different ethnic groups since ethnicity was very often synonymous with a particular trade or level of skill. For example, Bavarians went into cigar-making, brewing and furniture making; Irish and Germans were in the building trades; Scandinavians were the lake seamen; Jews were in the clothing trades; American-born workers worked their way first into highly skilled trades as railroad engineers or as printers. Czechs, Poles, and Italians were used as strikebreakers.[29] In addition, American workers were a very mobile labour force, moving on to new parts of the country to find job opportunities or responding to the lure of free land.

Ethnicity was not only correlated with one's trade or level or skill, but also with one's level of education or degree of radicalism. For example, female Jewish garment workers were not only highly educated but quite politically radical as were Bavarian cigar-makers. Both these groups, of course, later played important roles in the labour movement – the former in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the latter in the formation of the American Federation of Labor. In addition, ethnicity also shaped a wide variety of attitudes towards acquisition of property or education for one's children, which in turn were crucial in affecting the mobility of the group.[30]

Thernstrom notes that the Irish predilection for the acquisition of property at the expense of their children's education may have slowed their mobility.

For women, the situation was further complicated by the fact that they shared the ethnic values of their own group, but were additionally subjected to the group's views on the role of women, which in turn affected their possibilities in the workforce. Italian women, for example, were often prevented from working in situations where their virtue could be compromised by the presence of a man. This meant either that the family could not benefit from the woman's earning capacity, or that she would be forced into doing some piece work at home. Italian women were also not permitted to attend union meetings at night so was very difficult to organize them into unions.

The situation of Jewish women was quite the opposite from that of Italian women for a variety of cultural reasons, which I will not explore here. They tended to be better educated than other immigrant women and certainly more radical and ambitious. Consequently, despite the fact that the garment industry is often used as an example of an industry most difficult to organize because it was scattered in small shops which went into and out of business seasonally, Jewish female garment workers were amongst the first to form a strong union: the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in 1900.

Sex Role Problems

In addition to the female labour force being split by class and ethnicity, women as a group suffered from a further cleavage, which did not affect men, between single and married women. Until the Second World War, it was typical for a working woman

to cease working upon marrying. Thus it was argued with some degree of justice that women's attachment to the workforce was fleeting. They did not remain at work long enough to develop skills, and were not allowed to enter into apprenticeships, since, presumably, they would not remain in the trade. Further, the notion that they would soon leave work to be married, tended to make them put up with low pay and harsh working conditions. Marriage, with few exceptions, must have siphoned off from their number many discontented or talented women who might have remained to organize them. Those who remain in the labour force were often the neediest and most depressed workers.

In 1850, for the first and last time, there was a decline in women's participation in the workforce. This period was also "the high point of the Victorian family as a social fact, although its pinnacle as a cultural ideal was to follow a generation later."[31]

The Economy and the Female Labor Force

Generally, there was a decline in household manufacture as a proportion of all industrial production, but a very large proportion of employed women still worked at home, especially in the cities: Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Women sewed garments by hand, primarily cheap work clothing, since the sewing machine had only been introduced in 1840. In addition to sewing at home, it was very common for families to take in boarders. "In 1910, 4.5 million persons, 5% of the nation's population – lived with families to which they were not related."[32] Even in 1920 a government study found that a million women kept boarders.[33] Since the ready-made clothing industry was in transition from domestic to factory manufacture, many women worked as dressmakers and milliners.

In the major cities and in small towns where garment factories were located, the sweating system was firmly established by 1850. Women and entire families did piecework at home sometimes for up to eighteen hours a day for as little as one dollar. The father of the family would help if he were out of a job. Cigar-making was done by families in tenements rented to them by factory owners and rent deducted from earnings.

Prostitution was often the only alternative to starvation wages for women. An 1858 survey of New York City prostitutes found that 50% had been servants, 50% were from fifteen to twenty years of age, 75% were under twenty-five years of age, and 63% were foreign-born. 25% of prostitutes had been seamstresses.[34]

In 1890, the Census counted about 1.2 million women working as domestics. Domestic service was still the largest occupation for women in this period. In general, until World War II, the female labour force, domestic and industrial, was comprised of immigrant women, black women, widows, and single women. In other words, until—and perhaps even during— World War II, women worked not for "pin money" or for luxuries, as they were accused of doing, but out of need to support themselves and dependent children.

Aside from domestic work, the next largest field of women's work was unskilled and semi-skilled factory work. One million women worked in factories in 1890, outnumbering men in clothing factories.[35] They not only worked in areas related to women's traditional jobs of canning, preserving and sewing, but in foundries, tin plate mills, print shops and metal fabricating plants. Within these factories, however, women did only certain jobs, generally assembling, packing or tending semi-automatic

machines. Most women factory workers were white, young (under 25), single, and in this period, immigrants.

There were one quarter of a million school teachers, and teaching was one of the few occupational outlets for educated middle class women. The only other profession available to women was nursing, and the 1890 census accounts for 40,000 nurses. For years, the census counted nurses under domestic servants and, having read accounts of their training and working conditions, it is not difficult to see why they might have been viewed as such; i.e., they lived and worked in homes and hospitals.[36]

The Civil War and increasing industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century greatly widened work opportunities for women. Nearly two million black women were freed from slavery, although until World War I most stayed put in the South, working as domestics or field hands. In 1890, a third of black women over ten worked, while only a tenth of white women over ten worked. The high labour force participation rate of black women in the workforce as opposed to white women, reflects the former's condition of poverty and discrimination. Due to the addition of about one million black women to the labour force of 1870, the participation rate for all women went up markedly in the 1860s and 1870s.[37]

Although women had to replace men who fought, became disabled or died, the Brownlees note that it is difficult to estimate the precise influence of the war itself on the labour force participation of women. Their guess is that, in general, the Civil War was less of an influence on the increasing labour force participation of women than the accelerating industrial revolution itself, that women at this time in history were available to supply a demand for vast numbers of unskilled labourers. At any rate,

they note that the rates of labour-force expansion that took place in the 1880s and in the first decade of the twentieth century have never been exceeded.

Demographic changes such as urbanization and decreased fertility made large numbers of women available for the expansion of the labour force. In the mid-nineteenth century the rate of marriage decreased and the age of the first marriage rose. Immigration peaked in 1880s and in the first decade of the twentieth century, coinciding with the decades of the most rapid increase in the participation rates of women. As a whole, however, the participation rate of immigrant women was 50% higher than that of American-born women.[38]

During this period, women had greatly expanded opportunities in the fields of nursing and teaching and they began to make inroads into clerical and stenographic work where they were unopposed by male craft unions. In the seventies, they began to push men out of clerical work– until then, a male preserve, since they were willing to work for lower wages.

Black versus White Workers

Under slavery, black people had worked in agriculture in the South.[39] When they were freed, white workers saw them as a threat to their jobs and wages and, before the Industrial Revolution when employed workers took action as a group distinct from both employers and independent artisans, it was nearly always to eliminate the competition of black labour, whether slave or free.

Competition between black and white workers – inevitable in the South – was particularly resented in the middle colonies and in

New England. In the South, white workers attempted to limit the employment of black people in skilled trades, although this must have been impossible to accomplish since many writers have noted that black people were working as artisans before abolition.[40]

According to Goldin, slavery may have changed the relative valuations that black and white women had for work.[41] For example, certain occupations may have come to be scorned because they had been done by black people previously. In the South, for example, domestic service was regarded as a black person's job, and black people, therefore, had the field to themselves. This same outlook may explain why white people in the North often refused to work with black people.[42]

Chapter 3

Women and Trade Unions, 1866-1900

As noted in the Introduction, a simple class analysis of the situation of women in the American labour force seems inadequate. Thus I have discussed male views of the female role, class consensus and conflict, ethnic conflict and the way ethnicity related to level of skill as well as different interests of married and single women and the relationship between black and white workers. From 1850 to 1900, American-born white women were in part displaced by masses of immigrants, and these immigrants, in turn, were divided by ethnic and skill differences. The nation had vastly grown in population and the nature of business and industry had changed drastically. Women who remained in the blue collar workforce, not seeking new opportunities by way of education, marriage, or migration west, or in the professions, did so mainly out of need. They worked long hours, for low pay, under unsanitary or unsafe conditions.

For women, industrial jobs were in traditional industries which had moved from home to factory; for example, in textiles and food preserving or in light industrial jobs such as assembling or packing. Where women did work in heavier industries, it was as unskilled workers. The major cleavage – heretofore not dealt with – as far as trade unionism was concerned, was the opposition by skilled male workers to unskilled women; that is, by skilled male workers to a technology and work organization that was breaking their jobs down into unskilled work.

Except for a few instances when they cooperated with or aided women workers, skilled union men were either overtly hostile to women workers or ignored them. Hostility derived mainly from the threat to jobs which women posed by working either for lower pay or as strikebreakers. Those instances where men were magnanimous towards women workers were cases where the woman posed absolutely no threat at all.

Although in many communities and in many factories and trades women must have been related to their male colleagues; their wives, sisters, or daughters, one wonders why solidarity between male workers and exploited women did not arise more often. One has to remember that in this period, and especially in the garment industry or in canning, where women industrial workers were found, women were working not for fulfillment or for self-expression. Their presence in the labour force represented poverty, either through death or desertion of the male breadwinner, or worse–in the eyes of male workers–because the female worker's breadwinner earned pay insufficient to support his family. Thus, the fact that women seemed to end up in the most menial and unskilled jobs at the lowest pay, men saw not as a condition to be corrected by improving men's job status and pay, but as a symptom to be cured by raising male wages and by ensuring male job security by getting women out of the labour force and back into the home where they belonged.

Except for those unfortunate women who were widowed or single, or those women with ambition who wanted to be self-supporting, most women would probably have agreed with this point of view, and marriage was viewed as an improvement in their lot. Also, male workers were correct in feeling that if women, working at lower pay, were to cause a reduction in their

wages, their own wives would then have to work. A further reason for the shame involved in having a wife work was not only the probability of her doing menial and low-paying work, but the destruction of family life; children unattended, meals not well prepared, clothes not mended or sewn. It is difficult for working-class women today to keep up with housework when they have an outside job, but then, before automobiles, supermarkets, and labour-saving devices such as washing machines, it was even more difficult.[43]

Protective Legislation

With the development of laissez-faire capitalism, there were two possible ways for workers to protect themselves against exploitation; they could organize trade unions or they could try to obtain protective legislation. For male workers, these two objectives had been intertwined and mutually reinforcing. For women, since they were mostly without the benefit of unions, the quest for protective legislation was more desperate. For each sex, as I shall explain, the bases for requesting protective legislation varied considerably.

Very early in the labour history of the United States, male artisans had banded together to protect their wages and conditions of work. For example, as early as 1741, New York bakers went on strike against government regulation of wages and conditions of work.[44] After 1850, despite encountering grave difficulties in maintaining unions, men were far ahead of women workers in this area.

Occasionally, male and female workers cooperated; I have already noted the cooperation between the New England Workingmen's Association and the Lowell Female Labor Reform

Association in their attempt to achieve the ten hour day. In 1863, the conditions of seamstresses were so bad that the machinists and blacksmiths actively campaigned for union support to help these women organize.[45]

The National Labor Union, the Daughters of St. Crispin, and the Knights of Labor

In 1866, the National Labor Union, under President William H. Sylvis, seated four suffrage delegates: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Mary Kellogg, and Mary MacDonald after putting a great deal of pressure on male delegates. Sylvis was receptive to women in labour unions, since he felt that labour needed to mobilize every ally in order to escape from its difficulties, and he was prepared to collaborate with black workers, with suffragists, and even with immigrant workers. Sylvis believed in political action and one of the union's most important achievements was its successful lobby for the eight-hour day for federal employees. The union felt that if federal employees were to get the eight-hour day, it would soon spread to private employment[46]. Unfortunately for women, this union, like many others, did not survive. In 1869, the first national union of women workers, the Daughters of St. Crispin, was founded, but it disappeared by the depression of 1873.[47]

Prior to 1870, the Knights of Labor had formed their organization. Later, under the presidency of Terrence V. Powderly, who had been elected in 1879, this organization had a Department of Women's Work. The Knights' philosophy was to attempt to unionize all workers, paid or unpaid, skilled or unskilled, even including small businesses. Although in the rank and file of the organization there was a great deal of discrimination against admitting women into the union, at the

leadership level and according to its philosophy, the Knights were committed to the cause of unionizing women. Whatever its failings on women's behalf, when the Knights died out, it was many years before women would find the same union acceptance.[48]

Leonora Barry held the post of General Investigator of the Knights of Labor, looking into the wretched work conditions that led many women into prostitution. As far as she was concerned, the main obstacle to organizing women were attitudes towards working women held by both men and women. Both held that women working outside the home constituted an unnatural situation best ended by marriage. She found women passive and overly concerned with social prestige and religious scruples.

In 1881, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada (Federation) was founded. Led by Adolph Strasser and Samuel Gompers, both cigar-markers, this organization was mainly concerned to press for federal and state legislation that would protect trade union property. The latter was conceived broadly as the right to conduct trade union business, not a small ambition in the view of the fact that most trade union business–that is, strikes or boycotts–was considered illegal and in restraint of trade. The Knights of Labor under Powderly had been unwilling to use strikes and boycotts and instead had preferred such methods as discussion and moral suasion.

The platform of the Federation was purely legislative: legal incorporation for trade unions; compulsory education for children and the prohibition of child labour for children under fourteen, and enforcement of a national eight-hour law. In the legislative area, the Federation of Organized Trades was an abject failure

and that was one reason why, later, its successor organization – the American Federation of Labor, led by Gompers – cautioned unions to rely on the strike rather than the legislature for demands.

At the second annual convention, the Federation assured women that they would be accepted on an equal footing with men. They advocated opening more occupations to women, equal pay for equal work, and a cooperative attempt by all unions for shorter hours.[49] On the face of it, their attempt to help women seemed admirable, but in practice it was quite limited. The crucial phrase here is on "an equal footing with men"; the union was prepared to accept skilled workers, but since few women were skilled, few could be helped by the union.

Furthermore, just as prominent labour leaders like Gompers began to see that women might have a place in unions, employers who felt threatened by a united front of male and female workers fought in every way to keep women down.[50] Employers looked upon women in the same way that they looked upon immigrants– as a source of cheap labour. In the 1880s and 1890s employers said that women could not operate complicated new machinery and men were typically given the high paid jobs. According to Baker, technology pushed the men up, the women down, and the children out.[51]

The introduction of highly complicated machinery operated by skilled men meant a practically insuperable cleavage for unions to overcome, since skilled, highly-paid workers did not want to be united with very low-paid, unskilled women who might undermine union strength because of the low union dues they paid and their proclivity to leave their jobs. But, if unions had pressed for equal pay for equal work, where women did the same

work as men, they would have been fired.[52] The principle of equal pay for equal work was sound, basically, but has to be achieved within the context of equality of opportunity for men and women, otherwise, equal pay meant that women were thrown out of work.

Although the federation of Organized Trades survives today, in a certain sense – in the form of state federations of labour, which are not unions but labour union bodies whose function it is to obtain legislation – in 1886, the Federation was transformed into the American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers. While the AFL replaced the Knights of Labor, it was organized differently, as a craft rather than an industrial union, and also, unlike the Knights, was more durable in that it was able to survive both economic boom and slump.

Samuel Gompers was a Dutch Jew who had studied Marx, and was both class conscious and idealistic. He eventually left his socialist leanings behind as he developed into a superb negotiator and union tactician. Initially he was able to maintain control over a number of extremely autonomous union locals through sheer skill, but after an unsuccessful strike by tenement cigar-makers, he decided to remodel the AFL after the British Trade Union Counsel. In keeping with this objective, he asked for complete authority over locals by the federal union, increased dues, instituted a far-reaching benefit system for union members, and demanded the power to equalize funds between poor and well-to-do locals. In addition to craft unions, two industrial unions – the Mine Workers and the Brewery Workers – were affiliated to the AFL.

In the AFL, Gompers was continually pulling against the diverse interests of union locals; for example, Gompers himself wanted

to admit black workers, but locals did not. In the 1890s, over five million immigrants came to the United States and ethnic differences caused some of Gompers most difficult problems. In addition, in such a large country, Gompers and the AFL had to face variations in the mode of production, absence of contracts between workers in different sections or regions, and jurisdictional disputes between unions.

The problem of dual unionism was also ever-present; non-affiliated unions muscling in where the AFL was already involved. In addition to union problems, such as being seriously weakened after every period of depression or after every unsuccessful strike, the AFL faced business at its most decadent height. Firms like the Carnegie Corporation hired private guards and goons, labour spies and scabs (strikebreakers). There were lockouts, yellow dog contracts (where the worker promises not to strike), and blacklists. Picketing in those days often meant risking serious injury by company guards or by the police.

Furthermore, unions had to face hostile courts. The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 – which the large companies fought so successfully – were turned against unions. Strikes and boycotts were interpreted as conspiracies to commit unlawful acts in restraint of trade. The AFL policy towards women vacillated. In its earliest days, it appealed to women to organize and supported women's suffrage and the appointment of female organizers. In 1892, Mary E. Kenney was appointed as a full-time organizer.[53]

As far as women were concerned, the AFL was chiefly interested in passing resolutions. In 1895 only 5% of union members were women. Gradually, the case of black workers and the initial impulse in favor of women workers got swept aside by the true

feelings of locals which were opposed both to black workers and to women workers. Every year until 1914, the AFL passed resolutions stating that a woman's place was in the home and that working women undermined the family. Gompers, as usual, tried to reconcile the two factions and noted that women had a right to work if they had to, but that it would be better if they were excluded from industrial labour.[54]

In 1899 men in manufacturing were earning on average $587 dollars per year, women a little over half of that, and black women only half of what white women earned. In Boston, Gompers was forced to support the action of metal craft union, which forced women out of the core making trade on the basis that such employment contributed to the degeneration of womanhood.[55]

Gompers' confusion about women's rights to work was not philosophical; he was essentially a practical man. He was willing to support the right of women to work and to unionize, if he felt this would benefit his male unionists, but given the strong local autonomy of his federal union, he was always subject to local union pressure. In many cases, male locals were able to keep women out and Gompers had no choice but to go along.

When women were accepted into unions, they often could not afford the dues. Accepted on the basis of reduced dues, they were given no voice in negotiations, and few benefits in the event of strike. Occasionally, a national union simply refused to admit women. In this event, the involved women would ask the AFL to affiliate them directly to the national union. This happened in the case of women boot and shoemakers; they were refused admission to the Boot and Shoemakers local, which also opposed their direct affiliation to the AFL. The central body in this period

knuckled under the autonomous local. In the same way, locals had no difficulty keeping women out of apprenticeship programs.

In June 1988, Elizabeth Morgan, the socialist daughter of a working-class factory operative, organized the Ladies Federal Labor Union Number 2703.[56] She had been a member of the Knights of Labor and had a good record organizing watch-makers and shoe workers. Her union included clerks, book binders, candy makers, typists, dress makers, music teachers, gum makers and others, and had a charter from the AFL. The Ladies Federal Labor Union fought for state compulsory school attendance laws; the eight-hour day for women and children, and the abolition of tenement sweatshops. By 1892, the Ladies Federal Labor Union had, itself, created twenty-three craft unions, all of which received charters from the AFL and was the most important organization of women workers affiliated to the AFL.

As a result of Mrs. Morgan's tireless investigations and crusades against the abuses of the sweatshop, with the help of Florence Kelley[57], the support of trade unions, Hull House residents, and a very wide variety of women's organizations, the Factory and Workshop Inspection Act of 1893 was passed. Again, this was an instance where middle class people worked on behalf of working women. Many writers have noted that the middle class was mainly interested in its own health and safety realizing they were buying clothing manufactured in rat-infested and germ-laden surroundings. Looking further, however, this was not the case; in bringing such issues as sweatshops before the courts, the only basis for outlawing them was that they affected the health of the general public or affected the general welfare.

Sweatshops might never have been outlawed had the only case against them been the health of the families who labored in them. Similarly, a New York court had held many years before that public health was totally unaffected by the number of hours bakers worked. Thus, it was essential to have the middle class support for the Factory and Workshop Inspection Act of 1893, and this support had to be seen by the court in terms of how sweatshops affected the health of the middle class public.

The Act was the first law to adequately regulate child and female labour. Although manufacturers were opposed to the law which they felt reduced profits and increased competition, so great was public support for the Act that they were reluctant to fight it. Nevertheless, in 1895, the Supreme Court of the State of Illinois found the Sweatshop Act unconstitutional.

The triumph of the American Federation of Labor, the successful paradigm of trade unionism in the United States, is largely the reason behind the failure of women workers to achieve equality with male workers in the United States. Craft unionism won a decisive victory over the industrial unionism epitomized by the Knights of Labor which had been so receptive to women.

In its victory, the AFL abandoned many pursuits and directions that had interested the Knights. For example, it gave up attempts at forming producer's cooperatives and totally abandoned socialism. It was opposed to a labour party. For the most part, it opposed or ignored attempts to attain protective labour legislation, except occasionally when it lobbied for legislation on behalf of women only. Instead, the AFL favored an economic form of trade unionism, accepting capitalism and prepared to work to achieve modest wage gains for highly organized groups of skilled workers. For women – who were by and large

unskilled workers – this meant being left behind by the union movement.

This is not the place to attempt a thorough history of the AFL, but I would like to touch on a few main points. Producers' cooperation – which had been the goal of both the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, Pelling has suggested – failed, because, unlike in Europe, there was an absence of suitable legislation to protect it. Also, in the United States, individuals who might have made it work, used their talents to start their own businesses. As for socialism, and a labour party, in this period both were riddled by dogmatism and factionalism and Gompers feared – rightly so I think – that they would undermine the union movement. Gompers was, then, first opposed to socialism of practical grounds, but later opposed it on ideological grounds.[58]

Had socialism survived in the United States to the extent that it might have supported a viable labour party standing for egalitarianism and collective welfare, supportive of reforms benefitting all workers (not only women), it is possible that the condition of women in the labour force would have improved sooner. But since there has not been a labour party, there has not been a constant and articulate exposition of the problems of the working class, nor a view of collective welfare expressed in opposition to a prevailing laissez-faire, individualistic business ethic. Also, having chosen to cooperate with business, rather than trying to achieve alternative types of economic organization, the trade unions have not spoken adequately for workers.

The federation of autonomous craft locals which comprised the AFL, succeeded where the industrially-organized Knights of Labor had failed in binding together groups of workers who were diverse in terms of ethnic group, geographical location, and level

of skill. What had been a weakness, finally undermining the Knights, the AFL, turned into a strength; the craft model of unionism maximized loyalty and solidarity, where the industrial union, all-encompassing, left its flanks open to elements able to undermine it.

Whereas the Knights in their time had chosen to fight for legislation because they had felt – and rightly so – that unions were failing, the AFL chose to emphasize union activity (strikes, boycotts), because they felt – again, rightly so – that the courts were against them. The AFL stressed protection from competition (as did big business) in the form of cheap immigrant and child labour, as well as the eight-hour day, but they were prepared to get it through the use of the strike.

In recounting the history of the AFL, I wish to emphasize the fact that the craft model was not chosen deliberately to keep women out of unions, but because it had proven to be the most successful form of union organization with deep roots going back to pre-revolutionary times. I hope I have also made it quite clear that the AFL had a bitter and bloody fight to achieve what success it did. The AFL did indeed discriminate against women, and it undoubtedly could have done more to help women organize without harming its own position, had its view towards women working been less equivocal. By and large, however, the most damage was done to the cause of getting women into unions by the fact that, as unskilled workers, they really had no place in the AFL and, by the fact that by eschewing socialism the unions had, in a sense, lost a certain social vision. Later, Margaret Dreier, the president of the National Women's Trade Union League was to say in an emotional speech, "Where there is no vision, the people

perish.” Women did perish because the AFL’s vision was too narrow to encompass unskilled women workers.

Chapter 4

The Changing Structure of the Economy and Trends in Female Employment, 1900-1936

The year 1900 marked the most important upsurge of female employment. Increased urbanization, a large influx of cheap foreign labour, and the development of new mass production industries combined to cause a dramatic increase in the female labour force.[59] In 1900, the proportion of women holding jobs was 25.2%, which was a jump from 20.4% in the previous decade. Thereafter, the proportion of women working remained almost constant, although it fell to 23.3% in 1920 and to a little over 24.3% in 1930. Thus, it would be incorrect to say that either women suffrage or the two world wars were responsible for the upsurge in women's' employment[60] (although they may have changed the aspirations of women and some of the occupational stereotypes).

Oppenheimer describes two distinct trends in female labour force participation in the twentieth century. She notes a gradual increase from 1900 to 1940 and then a very sharp rise in female labour force participation after 1940, especially by certain groups of women, especially those married and older women.[61]

There have been arguments among economists regarding the effect on the labour force of the increased participation of women. For example, Durand advanced the argument that the declining labour force participation of older men can be explained by the fact that semi-skilled female workers were

displacing older, skilled, male workers, and also by the fact that pensions and improved social security enabled workers to retire earlier.[62] Also, the decline of agricultural work meant a reduction in a certain number of semi-skilled jobs for men. Oppenheimer rejects the view that semi-skilled women are replacing men on the basis that the operative's category is not an expanding one for women. In 1920, this category comprised 24% of the female labour force and slipped to 20% in 1920. It remained stable for several decades and was down to 16% in 1960.

Long advanced the thesis that female workers have been displacing older male workers because of their generally higher level of education "in conjunction with the need for clerical and service labour."[63] Oppenheimer rejects this thesis as well, since for the period under discussion men were not previously in the clerical or service sectors to be replaced. Moreover, Oppenheimer notes that the craftsmen-foremen category has increased in importance – but for men only.[64] Oppenheimer notes the decline in agricultural work, first for women, then for men, and the rise in the proportion of workers in manufacturing and services. Numerically, the service sector is the most important one. Data on the sex composition of occupations has been kept only since 1940, but Oppenheimer notes that how the trends in occupations for women differ from that of that of the male labour force; for example, women left agricultural work before men and in 1940 under 5% of the female labour force was in agriculture. Since 1940, a majority of women workers were in the service industries, while in 1960, this was still not true for men.

Industrial shifts, as described by Bell and others, have led to occupational shifts.[65] Manufacturing, construction, and mining – all of which have grown more technical – have required more

craftsmen and foremen and highly skilled workers. In the service industries, characterized by bureaucratic organization, there has been a need for professional and technical workers. These two categories– "craftsmen-foremen" and "professional-technical" have primarily been filled by male workers.

Women started early on, in 1900, to enter non-manual occupations in increasing proportions. In 1900, the proportion of female workers in the professions and in clerical work, was much higher than men, and women have retained this advantage. In the years 1900 to 1960, from 18%-34% of men have been in non-manual occupations, as opposed to 18-53% for women. Women went into certain occupations and, according to Oppenheimer, these occupations became sex-labeled; that is, they became known as female occupations and women trained and were hired for them; for example, telephone operators, nurses, teachers and clerical workers comprised of 8.4% of the female labour force in 1900. By 1960 they comprised 19.9% of the female labour force.[66] Thus, according to Oppenheimer, industrial and occupational changes have favored the entrance of women – perhaps more than men – into the labour force, but, I note, openings have been in unskilled work or in non-union clerical and professional jobs.

Oppenheimer notes that it is not only demand, but the interaction of supply and demand which enabled women to take advantage of available job opportunities. Indeed, most economists, including Durand, note that developments in the labour force very often paralleled demographic aspects of the population, so that, for example, an increase in the proportion of married women in the population usually results in an increase in the proportion of married women in the labour force.

Bancroft notes that urbanization opened up employment opportunities for women but reduced the labour force participation of young and old men. (Durand says more of the former than the latter, that it, urbanization, opened up opportunities for women, but was not so much a factor of reducing labour force participation of young and old men). The decline of the birth rate in the 1930s, in addition to the reduction of the work week to forty hours, made it possible for married women both to work and take care of their families, bringing vast increases during the World War II and post-war periods, in the participation of 35-65 year old women in the labour force. Oppenheimer remarks that in the war and post-war periods, the number of women in the 20-24 year old age group was simply insufficient to meet the need for female labour, and Bancroft notes that the absence of the younger age groups from the labour market may account in large part for the especially sharp increase in the utilization of older women in the labour force. In addition, looking at the characteristics of the population in general, Durand notes a rise in the proportion of married women and an increase in the proportion of older persons; hence one, would expect to find more older and married women in the labour force.[67]

In 1910, census takers were instructed to count women workers, particularly women employed on a part-time basis, revealing a high workforce participation rate for women. According to the Brownlees, rather than viewing this high participation rate as an exaggeration, one might view previous censuses as underestimating women's work-force participation.[68]

Between 1910 and 1930, however, the employment of women in manufacturing increased by less than 10%, but the employment of women in clerical occupations more than tripled; in trade,

more than doubled, and in professional service, more than doubled. In 1930, fully 15% of employed women were professional workers, and 31% were in clerical sales.[69]

By 1930, clerical occupations were the third largest category for women – 31% of the female workforce, as opposed to 1910, when they were the eighth largest category for women workers comprising 17% of the female workforce. Thus, after 1900, the most important development for the occupational distribution of women workers is the growth of the clerical sector. As we shall see, the enlargement of the female labour force grew – most writers contend – as a response to the demand from this sector.

The trend in the decline of industrial employment for women began in the 1840s when US-born women were replaced by immigrants. Two other important factors contributing to the relative decline of women in industrial work were the union opposition to women doing skilled work and the changeover to heavy industry. An industry in which women have persisted is the needle trade, one of the best organized. The degree of unionization in this area has been explained both by the ethnic solidarity of the Jewish women who worked in the garment industry and by the fact that this labour-intensive craft was impossible to automate.

World War I induced a brief spurt in demand for women in factories, which declined during the ‘twenties, along with the female labour force participation rate in general. Among the reasons for this general decline in female labour force participation were rising income levels, lowered participation rate of immigrant women, and a decline in the needle trades due to more simplified clothing.[70]

During the war itself, one million women worked in war industries and many worked in what had previously been exclusive male preserves, for example, driving streetcars.[71] However, Chafe points out that the car cannot be viewed as having produced a revolution in women's economic role, and neither do the 'twenties, after women got the vote, represent any sort of watershed in the history of women at work. The entire period from 1920 to 1940 witnessed very little progress for women in the areas of discrimination in wages, where men and women were doing the same work, and the opening up of new occupational opportunities, except in the white collar sector.

During the First World War, only 5% of women war workers joined the labour force for the first time. (As in the Second World War, many had transferred from lower paying jobs and were expected to return to them when the emergency passed.[72] The United States was in the war for only twenty months, but from 1910 to 1920, there was a 6% overall decline in the percentage of women in the manual and service sector of the economy. There was a 21% overall decline of the percentage of black women in the labour force, thus demonstrating that the war economy did little to help black women overcome discriminatory barriers.[73] However, for black women there was a 4% increase in industrial work and 103% increase in their participation in the clerical and sales sector. The latter sector taken, taken alone, represents a 122% increase in participation. It must be noted, however, that these high percentages reflected mainly a previously extremely low representation in these occupations.

For the most part, World War 1 did not open up men's jobs for women, or change the face of discrimination against women in the workforce, but, rather, marked the expansion of the clerical

and sales sectors of the economy where in the absence of men, women were acceptable. There were small steps, however, in removing both discriminatory barriers (and to the extent that they created new female ghettos, many have contributed to discriminatory practices) and in noting special labour force problems of women. For example, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor was established. Women lawyers were appointed to the government legal advisory committees, and female doctors, for the first time, gained access to the United States of Public Health Service. Some of these victories were of short duration, however. In New York City twenty women judges were forced to resign after the war, and discrimination was rampant in the Federal Civil Service. Women were excluded from 60% of all civil service exams and from 64% of exams for scientific and professional positions.[74]

In the Twenties, there were 10,679,048 women in the labour force. Two million were clerical workers; 700,000 were salesgirls, and 450,000 were in the professions. During the Twenties, the female labour force grew by 26%, but the rise in absolute numbers should not obscure the fact that, as a percentage of the fourteen-and-over age group, the percentage of women in the labour force remained steady.

According to Daniel Bell, the Twenties marks the point in American economic history where, although industry continued to grow, its share of employment declined relative to that of the white collar or tertiary sector. Bell notes that developed nations have evolved from a pre-industrial through to an industrial and to a post-industrial society. In pre-industrial society, people live off the land: agriculture and extractive industries predominate and, next to work in these industries, domestic service is the largest

paid occupation. In an industrial society, most paid employment occurs in the goods-producing sector. The post-industrial society, according to Bell, is based primarily on services: repairs to machines, transportation, distribution, sales, finance, real estate, insurance, recreation, sports, education, and health. In addition, the large-scale and bureaucratic nature of all the activities carried on require incredible volumes of paperwork to be done, thus necessitating clerical workers to serve in every industry and in practically every occupation.

In 1900, Bell tells us, 30% of the labour force engaged in service and 70% of the labour force was involved in the production of goods. By 1980, Bell expects this situation to be exactly reversed, with 70% of the labour force in the tertiary sector. Looking back, however, 1920 marks the point where industry's share of employment began to decline. By 1950, the labour market was evenly divided between the industrial and service sectors, and by 1968, 60% of the labour force was in the service sector.

The tertiary service sector of the economy includes not only white collar, but also blue collar jobs (maintenance, for example), but within this sector of the economy, the white collar group has been the fastest growing one since 1920. Initially, the white collar jobs were primarily minor clerical and sales jobs held by women and semi-skilled workers while operatives still formed the single largest occupational category. Although Bell notes that "A service economy is largely a female-centered economy."[75]

> By 1930, three to four times as many women, relative to the total female population, participated in the labour force, as had participated

> during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Yet it has often been claimed that such a change awaited the social disruption attending World War II.[76]

According to the Brownlees, however, female participation in the labour force was lower than it might have been, due to the Depression, when strenuous efforts were made to keep women out of the workforce, since it was felt that women might unnecessarily deprive male heads of households of jobs. The Brownlees maintain that before the Depression, the participation rate for women may have reached a level higher than that obtained in 1940.[77]

During the Depression, women took whatever jobs were available – domestic, service or farm work. Altbach notes that farm women hiring out at extremely low wages subsidized the cotton and tobacco industries. Depressions and recessions always raised protests that women were taking jobs needed by men and that women did not really need these jobs, since they form a secondary workforce supported by someone else. Whether women are self-supporting or not – then, as now, because of the sexual segregation of the job market – women did not compete with men for the same jobs.

In an exception to this rule, however, Altbach notes that during the Depression there was sharp competition between men and women for some of the same professional and technical jobs.[78] Although, normally, women have a higher rate of unemployment than men do, the unemployment rate for 1931 was 26.2% of men and 18.9% of women. In the Thirties, many women found jobs

for the first time, since male members of their families were unemployed.

Chapter 5

Protective Legislation, Trade Unions and Reform Groups, 1900-1920

Around 1900, although some women were organized into unions – mainly locals, like the Collar Laundry Union of Troy (New York), making as much as $14 per week and rich enough to help striking male iron molders – the wages and working conditions of most women workers were deplorable. For example, the handbook of the1909 AFL convention noted that there were six million women in the labour force whose average annual salary was under $270 per year. In the textile industry, many women were becoming deaf from the noisy machinery and their children suffered a mortality rate one-third higher than that of other children. Work days were ten to fourteen hours, and women had to buy or rent their sewing machines, and pay for thread and electrical power.

By 1933, less than one quarter of one million women out of the six million in the workforce, were in unions. There were 460,000 workers in the textile mills, 700,000, retail clerks, 113,000 barbers, 284,000 electrical goods workers, and 435,000 women workers in hotels and restaurants who might have been organized.[79]

Despite resolutions and good wishes, the AFL was basically uninterested and unwilling to aid these unskilled women. Quite often women workers who were organized and ready to affiliate to the central union, were met with outright refusals to affiliate

them by male unions or by central union organizations. Since so few women were organized, therefore, those interested in the wellbeing of women workers, tried to obtain special protective legislation for them.

History of Protective Legislation

While certain kinds of protective legislation – especially limitations on hours and child labour laws – had a long history and, indeed, were supported by both men and women workers, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, protective legislation was thought of primarily to help women workers. In addition, whatever unions existed before the A.F. of L, tended to press for labor legislation, while the AFL was opposed to it, except for women.

As early as 1786, bakers in Philadelphia asked for a weekly minimum wage of $6.00. In 1791, house carpenters in Philadelphia asked for a ten-hour day, while a large-scale ten-hour movement was mounted among sixteen trades in Baltimore. In 1840 the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association had been involved in the campaign for the ten-hour day, which was obtained for federal government workers with the hope that it would be applied to private business, while in 1867 the National Labor Union was still requesting the eight-hour day.[80] Although by 1837, some skilled workers had already won the eight-hour day, mill women were working a seventy-five hour week.

At this time, the demand for a limited work day of eight hours was viewed not merely as a way to improve working conditions, but – just as limiting the hours of work per week is viewed today – as a way to spread work around and prevent unemployment. Ira Steward, the machinist-economist who promoted the eight-

hour day in this period, had a popular motto to express his views: "Whether you work by the piece or work by the day, decreasing the hours increases the pay." Behind this maxim was the theory that workers' income had to rise to meet their standard of living, or there would be an insufficient supply of workers. Women workers – who were not in unions – needed hours laws for humanitarian rather than economic reasons, since fourteen-hour days and six-day weeks were common. By 1867, there were eight-hour laws in many states, but all had private contract loopholes.

The first legislative investigation into factory conditions occurred in Massachusetts and in 1874 resulted in the first enforceable ten-hour law for women workers. The remainder of the decade was disappointing, as far as protective legislation was concerned, and failure in this area lead to a revival of trade unionism. Generally, throughout labour history in the United States, disappointment with the protective labour legislation lead to a revival of interest in trade unions, while union failures – lost strikes, for example, have led to a revival of interest in protective legislation. The Seventies was characterized by failure: legislation did not pass, and strikes such as the strike in New York City for the eight-hour day, failed.

On May 1, 1886, against the better judgment of their leaders, the rank and file of the Knights of Labor organized a nationwide strike for the eight-hour day. Again, the main argument for the shorter workday was that it was a way to spread employment. In the vanguard were the more radical socialist-minded German workers in cigar-making, furniture-making, and the building trades. The most publicized event of the strike was the bomb thrown by anarchists in Haymarket Square. As a result of the

strike, 200,000 workers did get the eight-hour day, but eventually lost it through lost strikes or unenforced legislation. Most tragic of all was the fact that the Haymarket Square violence discredited and led to the decline of the Knights of Labor.

Nevertheless, the late 1880s was a period of great unionization, with the AFL in the lead. In 1890 the AFL had a plan to get the eight-hour day through a series of rotating strikes by different trades. The carpenters were chosen to go on strike first; a good choice, since they won. The second choice, the miners, was a bad one; only one-tenth of miners were organized and the campaign for the eight-hour day had to be abandoned when they lost their strike. However, the eight-hour day was won by the building trades and, in 1907, by workers on government contract as well. In 1916, as previously noted, four railway brotherhoods – highly-skilled workers with strong unions – got the eight-hour day.[82]

Various Types of Protective Legislation

Aside from limitations on hours of work, there were a great many nineteenth century laws on the books regulating the work of men in hazardous occupations, such as in mines and tunnels and on railroads. Again, it was often not only the fact that these occupations were hazardous that lead to the successful passage of protective legislation in this area but also the fact that the workers in question were also members of strong unions.

In addition to limits on hours which applied to both sexes, the law required that women be totally prohibited from certain occupations; for example, from core making (in the metal trade) – a job done in extreme heat – and from night work of any sort.[83] Additional protective measures for women were separate and

sanitary rest rooms, and seats in the workplace. Prompt payment of wages in cash and one day of rest in seven were meant for workers of both sexes.

Legal Status of Protective Legislation

By 1900, fourteen states had limited the hours of women's work. Generally, the courts sustained limitation of women's working hours, but in 1904, in *People vs. Lochner*, the Court declared a law limiting the hours that male bakers in New York State could work, unconstitutional. The Court said that a baker's working hours in no way affected the general welfare; that being the only basis on which the law could have been upheld. In the area of limitation of hours, while men fared less well than women, court decisions eventually began to converge and gradually men got the same protection as women, as far as working hours was concerned.

In 1908, in a most important case, *Muller vs. Oregon,* the Supreme Court upheld Oregon's ten-hour law for women workers on the basis that women, as a class, were different from men, physically more fragile and also legally, since they were without the vote. Referring to a 1900 Pennsylvania judgment in *Commonwealth vs. Beatty*, where women had gotten the twelve-hour day and the sixty-hour week on the basis that their sex needed special protection, the judges in the case applied the same principle, arguing on the basis of a voluminous brief prepared by Louis Brandeis and his sister-in-law Josephine Goldmark. By 1913, both Mississippi and Oregon had ten-hour laws for men and women workers, and both laws had been sustained by the Supreme Court.

Although at times the Court seemed to vacillate with respect to protective legislation, despite some setbacks, generally it sustained this legislation especially in cases where the legislation was passed by states on the basis of very comprehensive legislation. With hindsight, one can see the trend on the part of the Court for sustaining protective legislation, but observers then must have been quite depressed at times. For example, as late as 1918, an Alaskan law regulating hours was declared unconstitutional as a breach of freedom of contract, and in New York State, an eight-hour law was declared null and void.

Then, several depressing setbacks for the advocates of protective legislation occurred around the period 1918-1923. A federal child labour law which had been passed in 1916 was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court and in 1923, the *Adkins vs. Children's Hospital*, the District of Columbia's minimum wage law, was declared unconstitutional.

The *Adkins* case was viewed with alarm by proponents of protective legislation for women – especially the Consumers' League and the Women's Trade Union League and all those progressive individuals and groups associated with the publication, *Survey*.[84] The decision had come after the 19th Amendment which gave women the vote on the basis that they were equal to men. Prior to the *Adkins* cases like *Muller vs. Oregon*, a protective law had been sustained on the basis that women were not equal to men in a number of respects. If this "inequality" were no longer the case, according to the Court, the proponents of protective legislation foresaw a very difficult time ahead in trying to have protective legislation survive Court scrutiny.

The *Adkins* decision rested on the following points: One, that minimum wage constituted price-fixing and therefore a restraint on trade; and two, that viewing women as a special class, denied them their rights to equal protection under the law. The judge made a few choice remarks about this sort of law (minimum wage) being a type of sovietism likely to lead to revolution. Justice Taft dissented, noting that in his opinion, the principle was no different than that applied to other cases – *Muller vs. Oregon* – where the constitutionality of limited hours of work was upheld. Taft saw no logical difference between "hours" and "wages" – "one is the multiplier and the other, the multiplicand." This answers the question of restraint of trade, but does not deal with the question of whether women out to be treated as special class.

The horror over the *Adkins* decision – which seemed to render precarious all attempts at improving working conditions through protective legislation – led to several reactions. The National Woman's Party (of which more will be said later) was undoubtedly pleased, since they advocated treating men and women equally. They would have supported protective legislation, had it applied equally to men and women. Samuel Gompers' reaction was, "I told you so." He said that legislation was neither to be sought nor trusted, for what the law gave, it could take away (trade unions were essential for women).

Progressives, people associated with *Survey*, suggested that the law be changed so that a two-thirds majority of Supreme Court would be necessary to overthrow state laws. Others, like Mary Anderson – formerly of the Women's Trade Union League and now head of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor – suggested that the campaign be continued through more studies

and even better briefs, so that the Court would be firmly convinced that a minimum wage or other legislation was the interest of the general welfare. Ironically, however, in the *Adkins* case – a huge brief of 1,200 pages, prepared by Felix Frankfurter and Mary Dewson of the Consumers' League – was given slight notice.

The Court then had no difficulty sustaining limits on hours in hazardous industries and seemed to favor to ten-hour laws for both men and women, while it balked at eight-hour laws. For example, in Illinois, an eight-hour law was declared invalid in 1895, although Massachusetts had a ten-hour law in 1876. The first eight-hour law for women only came in 1915 for women in the canning industry. Workmen's compensation, prompt payment of wages in cash, and one day of rest in seven were treated favorably by the courts. The prohibitions of women's work in certain industries, and of night work, in general, met little Court opposition.

Minimum wage laws and child labour laws met with much more difficulty in the courts and one can only guess that these laws really irritated judges sympathetic to laissez-faire economic doctrines which valued freedom of contract and trade above individual or social welfare. Starvation wages and cheap child labour were precious to employers. Despite the fact that each case was presumably judged on the basis of legal principle, all court decisions in certain periods have a certain coherence in that they reflect American values. For example, as Christians, judges favored keeping the Sabbath, but had no difficulty supporting child labour on the other six days of the week. As the nation became more concerned about working conditions, court decisions became more liberal.

Organized Response to Protective Legislation

The AFL supported the minimum wage, the eight-hour day, and prohibition of night work for women, but beyond that, by 1914, it was strictly opposed to protective legislation for union members. The AFL (that is, Samuel Gompers) believed that if union members were to obtain benefits from the State, union loyalty would be undermined. Their view of protective legislation for women and children, however was different; first of all, protective legislation that applied to women and children, only removed a certain number of women from competition with male workers. Second, male unionists, knowing that at heart they did not want women competing as full-fledged union members, were not totally without charity towards women. They were aware that women worked in deplorable conditions, and they knew that women were practically without bargaining power, as unskilled workers. Therefore, union members advocated protective legislation for women in order to help them. Third, union members, like most people at the time – including women – felt that women were more delicate than men because of their child-bearing functions and that, ideally, women belonged in the home. They felt that in supporting protective legislation for women, which removed women from certain trades and certain types of work, they were doing the right thing.[85]

Although the AFL had urged that special legislation for women be passed, and since they had supported the eight-hour day since 1892, nevertheless it was necessary to have strong unions to ensure that protective legislation was enforced. Since most women entered industry as unskilled workers and were kept out of craft unions, the result was that though women might have needed protective legislation most, it was skilled and unionized

male workers who reaped its benefits. As I have already noted, railway workers who were already making good pay (around $2,000 per annum) were amongst the first workers to get the eight-hour day in 1916. The majority of women working in industry or trade, however, received less than $6.00 per week and, around 1914, studies noted that many of their children were visibly undernourished.[86]

Fortunately for women, a variety of organizations emerged to rescue them from the indifference of the AFL In the 1890s a Working Woman's Protective Union was formed. It was not a labour union, but an organization directed and staffed by middle and upper class women to aid working women, especially seamstresses, to collect their wages. They provided for lawyers.[87]

The Consumer's League and the Women's Trade Unions League

Two other organizations, composed of both middle and working class women, are notable for their attempts to obtain both protective legislation and trade unions for women.[88] The first organization, the Consumers' League, headed by Josephine Shaw Lowell and Florence Kelley (a social worker) – was begun in order to alert consumers to the deplorable conditions of women working in both manufacturing and in retail trade. Founded in 1890, their strategy was to educate consumers about working conditions and to publicize a list of reputable manufacturers and retailers. These firms were put on so-called "White List" and garments manufactured under good conditions were allowed to bear the Consumers' League label.

The Consumers' League was concerned with educating consumers through various campaigns, for example, they advocated early Christmas shopping to allow clerks, themselves, to have time out for a Christmas holiday. They were remarkably successful, so much so, that Consumers' League labels were often pirated by unscrupulous manufacturers. Beyond this, the Consumers' League did studies and provided lengthy briefs used as a basis for protective legislation relating principally to maximum hours and minimum wages.

The Consumer's League was successful in getting middle class public opinion behind them, but their attempts to obtain protective legislation from state legislatures were often a failure faced as they were with the opposition of organized interest groups such as Chambers of Commerce and the National Association of Manufactures. These groups, for example, helped defeat the Child Labor Amendment and the Sterling Reed Education Bill in the Twenties.

The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) founded in 1903 by AFL organizer Mary O'Kenney Sullivan, and modeled after the WTUL in England, was a remarkable coalition of working and middle class women.[89] Its objectives were to educate the public about the need for protective legislation and to organize trade unions. In pursuit of these ends, the WTUL did studies of women workers, sent speakers to women's clubs, wrote magazine articles and produced an excellent journal, *Life and Labor*. But the organization also trained union organizers, organized unions, and provided substantial relief from a large number of extremely wealthy women and from unions. For example, Mrs. Willard Straight, whose husband was a benefactor of Cornell University, gave the WTUL thousands of dollars for various purposes. The

idea behind the WTUL was that the middle class women were to lead the organization at first, and eventually leave it to the direction of workers. This was indeed the case.

The WTUL included women like Mary Anderson (later, the director of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor) and Rose Schneiderman, Agnes Nestor, Elizabeth Maloney and Maud Swartz; all union women. It also included social workers like Lillian Wald and Jane Addams, socialites such as Mary Kehew and Mrs. Willard Straight, and the most original Mrs. Margaret Drier Robins. The latter was a very wealthy woman who practically single-handedly supported the organization at times, and lived in a slum with her husband, Raymond, so that she could carry on League activities (although she always voted Republican). Many of the working women associated with the WTUL however, were socialists.[90]

The WTUL was not, in itself, a trade union, although it had considered and abandoned the idea of forming a women's federation of labour after the English model.[91] Instead, it chose to cooperate with the AFL and attempted to get the women workers it organized, affiliated with that union. One severe problem involved in having chosen to work with the AFL – aside from the fact that many working women were unskilled and thus not qualified to enter craft locals – was the following: If the AFL refused to affiliate a particular group of women workers, they were unable to turn to another union for help. The AFL would claim jurisdiction over a particular craft – say, boot-making – but a boot-makers union affiliated to the AFL, with a large degree of local autonomy, might refuse to accept a group of women workers.

Turning to another union which also claimed jurisdiction in the boot-making craft was known as "dual-unionism"– considered the original sin in the mind of the AFL. Had the WTUL turned to another union, they would have had to sever all relations with the AFL Once, the WTUL against its deepest feelings, had to remain aloof from striking workers, not providing relief, because those workers were involved with a union rival of the AFL…. and a communist one no less! Later, when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.) arrived on the scene many League women saw this union as a better opportunity for women workers than the AFL – since it was an industrial rather than a craft union encompassing unskilled workers. There was a great deal of hard feelings between the WTUL and the AFL, and also between those in the WTUL who maintained their loyalty to the AFL and those who preferred dealing with the C.I.O.

After the retirement of Mrs. Robins, who had been able to obtain and hold the respect of Samuel Gompers, and the assumption of League leadership by working class women, relations between the two organizations deteriorated badly. It may be that socialist leanings, heretofore subordinated, came to the surface and into conflict with an increasingly conservative AFL.

The period from the 1890s through the First World War marked an era of humanitarian progressivism involving a vast array of middle-class organizations fighting for a broad range of reform legislation.[92] For example, reformers were concerned about temperance (and later, prohibition), woman suffrage, health issues such as pure food and drugs, and measures for children, such as compulsory school attendance and child labour laws.

Most groups were reformist rather than socialist and had reservations regarding the labour movement. Yet out of this

background of reform sprung the Consumers' League and the Women's Trade Union League, both deeply concerned about women workers and, of the two, the latter most deeply involved in getting working women organized into unions. Both groups subordinated the socialist impulses of their working class members and marshaled middle class support by portraying protective legislation as a means of protecting middle class values, motherhood and the home.

The AFL – for reasons already stated – and the Consumers' League and the Women's Trade Union League were content to accept protective legislation for women only, out of varying motives. The Consumers' League and the WTUL were apparently not concerned with the logical contradiction involved in trying, on one hand, to open up opportunities for women which men had reserved for themselves, and on the other hand, with getting these advantages for women on the basis of their inequality, both physically and legally, to men. There were several groups which did object however.[93]

First, after the passage of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the vote, the Court was reluctant to argue that women had legal disadvantages, although the vote by no means removed all the legal disadvantages from women. Second, some women themselves objected strenuously to protective legislation which was supposed to protect their child-bearing capacity: women who were single or who had already borne their children. Prohibition of night work drove many women out of well-paying, union jobs into low-paid, non-union work, especially in printing and in transportation. In 1915, a Women's League for Equal Opportunity was organized and in 1917 an Equal Rights

Association (E.R.A.) was formed by women in trades threatened by protective laws.[94]

Third, the National Woman's Party, led by Alice Paul, was opposed to protective legislation for women only. The Woman's Party advocated the removal of all political, civil and legal disabilities from women and had a single overriding purpose – an equal rights amendment. Although joined by many professional women who had nothing to gain and much to lose from protective legislation, the Woman's Party was in no way a professional interest group. It was a truly radical feminist group, totally unwilling to compromise in any way; its only goal was total equality between men and women.

The Woman's Party backed the E.R.A. in the face of assurances from the most eminent legal minds of the day that, if it were achieved, protective legislation would be wiped out. The Woman's Party was detested by those associated with the Consumers' League and WTUL who felt that they were ignorant of the misery in which most working women lived.[95] In addition, at heart, many of the same women who worked for unions and for protective legislation, and who were workers themselves, believed that women could not do the same work as men and that, if women became too successful, they might cause unemployment for brothers or future husbands. This was the sentiment expressed by Rose Schneiderman, a worker from the WTUL.[96]

Fourth, the AFL supported protective legislation for women, but not for men, and for the most part, simply ignored the issue of protective legislation unless prodded by some industrial disaster or an adverse court decision. As noted, the AFL was opposed to benefits derived from the State, since it felt that this undermined

the union. Its position on protective legislation had some very deleterious results for women.

Whatever influence the AFL might have had as a pressure group for protective legislation, was not only lost, but worse, its standing supporting the legislation for women and opposing it for men, confused the issue. Its stand created a cleavage between men and women workers, which could subsequently be utilized by both unions and employers to the detriment of women workers. For example, it was easy for an employer to stipulate that night work was part of a job, to eliminate women candidates, and once women were shunted out of certain skilled occupations, unions could then refuse to enroll them. Had the AFL – and one must say, both the C. L. and the WTUL – advocated protective labour legislation for workers of both sexes, their united front might have won the day. As it was, every group was out for its own interests.

In 1928, the United States Department of Labor published a report on the effects of all the labour legislation to that point. They found that women on the whole benefitted from protective legislation and that many men, in turn, benefitted from women's shorter working hours. The report did note that several new occupations were closed to women and was opposed to the outright prohibition of certain types of work for women.[97] Critics of the report felt that it unfairly ignored women who lost jobs they got during World War I through protective legislation.

By 1923, despite severe setbacks in the courts and sieges of state legislatures by manufacturing interests, most people were working under the legal maximum number of hours. The efforts of the WTUL and the Consumers' League cannot be underestimated, but also, protective legislation was a very

popular issue. It had been supported by a wide variety of middle class women's organizations, from horticultural groups to the National Association of University Women; in other words, by the enlightened middle class public.

Gradually, production studies convinced employers like Edward A. Filene of Filene's Department Store in Boston that a successful business could not and should not be carried along on the backs of ill-paid and ill-treated workers. Efficiency would determine profit level and, in order for a business to be efficient, there had to be happy, well-paid workers and, of course, happy, well-paid workers would not be interested in unions.

Trade Unions

On the union front, the picture was dismal for women. The WTUL continued to provide financial assistance and legal aid for striking women and in 1910, provided relief in the great Uprising of the Twenty Thousand (an eleven-week general strike by 20,000 women shirtwaist makers). In 1910 it was found that 76,748 women belonged to trade unions and that these were concentrated in the garment trades, textiles, weaving, book-binding, shoe-making, tobacco, retail sales, and the musical and theatrical arts. This figure represented 1.4% of all the female wage earners and only 5.2% of women in manufacturing.[98]

In 1920, the newly organized Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor did a study which found that nine international unions had constitutional provisions barring the entry of women. During the First World War, women got mainly the low level jobs, according to Mary Anderson in *Women at*

Work. After the conclusion of the war, the greatest increased in female employment were in clerical and professional jobs, un-unionized occupations. This change in the nature of work experience for women – just as surely as immigration previously – undermined potential union strength of female industrial workers.

In the Twenties, the WTUL launched a heroic campaign to organize women textile workers in the South. They had little success against companies which owned the towns and the houses in which workers lived, and with workers who were apathetic, and not a little hostile to the ethnic women who came down from the cities of the north to help them.

Chapter 6

The New Deal, 1930-1936

The Depression of the 1930s and Roosevelt's New Deal administration marked a drastic turning point in worker's attempts to obtain unions, decent work conditions, and social legislation to prevent hardship arising from widowhood, unemployment, and long hours and low wages. In an attempt to revive industry and relieve unemployment, a great many programs were initiated by the government.

In 1933 under the National Industrial Recovery Administration (N.I.R.A.) codes for industrial production such as maximum hours and minimum wages for both men and women, were set. In 1935, the Fair Labor Standards Act was also concerned with maximum hours and minimum wages. In one sense, these production codes were a good thing for women workers, since, undoubtedly, many women who were not in unions received pay raises as a result. It would be a mistake, however, to think that these production codes embodied any kind of radical vision of job equality for women. In large part they reflected much of the same prejudice and discrimination towards women workers noted previously in this essay. For example, administrators felt that they were doing women a favor by reserving large numbers of poorly-paid secretarial jobs within the government for women workers.

Meanwhile, the government itself maintained nepotistic rules for work in the Civil Service which, of course, worked to the

detriment of any professional woman married to a civil servant. And certain types of menial or domestic work were not even covered by production codes with the excuse that the government hoped that these poorly paid jobs would disappear. During the Depression years, quite the opposite was true; many women were forced to do domestic work since there were so many laws prohibiting the hiring of married women or women over thirty-five.

During the Depression, when so many workers were unemployed, unions suffered a very drastic drop in membership. Several pieces of legislation passed during the New Deal helped to revive unions. The Norris-La Guardia Act of 1932 restricted the power of the federal courts to issue junctions against unions engaged in peaceful strikes and made yellow-dog contracts unenforceable in the courts.

In 1935, when the N.I.R.A. – which had given labour the right to organize – was declared unconstitutional, Congress replaced it with the Wagner Act. The Wagner Act or the National Labor Relations Act established the National Labor Relations Board, which was empowered to hold elections in plants to determine bargaining agents and to ensure that employers would not indulge in "unfair labor practices."[99] These laws plus the successful purge of Communist elements from within many unions which had taken place during the Twenties, revived union membership.

In addition, in 1936, a faction within the AFL broke away from that union to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Interested in organizing workers in burgeoning mass production industries, the new union signed up many women workers who were previously not members of unions. The C.I.O. was not particularly concerned with women workers, however, it merely

signed up women in order to achieve the status of a bargaining unit within plants. Many women joined the now revived I.L.G.W.U. and other predominantly female garment industry unions in this period.

The fact that government protective legislation during the New Deal applied to both men and women undercut many of the conflicts and divisions between those who were for or against this legislation. Banner notes that a number of organizations now began to unite around the Equal Rights Amendment. In the Twenties it was supported by the Federation of Business and Professional Women; in 1933 by the Women's Trade Union League; in 1940 by the Republican Party; and in 1944 by the Democratic Party. The AFL however, remained a steadfast adherent to voluntarism and opposed the minimum wage and government imposition of protective legislation.

Prior to the New Deal, support of social reform legislation was so widespread as to constitute a social movement. Concern for issues such as child labour and compulsory school attendance, health and safety for workers, pure food and drugs, was shared by individuals and groups in all classes. With the coming of the New Deal, however, and the enactment of social legislation covering many of these issues, the impetus for social reform that had energized these individuals and groups was lost. Their leaders were either too old or were coopted into government service or simply abandoned the fight.

By 1947, both the Consumers' League and the Women's Trade Union League were gone. In the case of both organizations, rationales for their demise were offered which did not quite reflect the truth. In the case of the Consumers' League, Florence Kelley said that since the conditions of women working in retail

trade had so vastly improved, there was no longer any need for the Consumers' League– a statement far from the truth. A similar excuse was put forth for the disbanding of the WTUL, that unions were now so accepting of women, that the WTUL was no longer necessary. Rose Schneiderman, formerly of the League, admitted that the real reason the WTUL had folded was that they received absolutely no financial support from the union movement and disbanded because of lack of funds.

A more direct cause of the demise of these organizations is that their leadership was coopted by the government during the New Deal. In large part, due to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was herself a member of the WTUL, President Roosevelt appointed many women to the agencies that his social legislation had set up. Social work was the ideal profession for enabling one to determine social needs and administer social programs and women dominated that profession.

Francis Perkins, Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, came not from the labour movement but from the Consumer's League where she had been a paid worker. Rose Schneiderman, the female member of the Labor Advisory Board of the N.R.A. came from the WTUL; Mary Anderson, director of the women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, was a union leader from the WTUL; Grace Abbott, a social worker, was the head of the Children's Bureau; and Mary Dewson, a social worker from the Consumer's League was appointed the head of the women's division of the Democratic Party. It has been estimated that Mrs. Roosevelt herself was personally responsible for the appointment of over 4,000 women to post office jobs, many of which were patronage positions.

Probably the most important legislation for women workers, and for men, was the Social Security Act of 1935. Under this Act, the federal government funded state programs for maternal and pediatric care, for programs to aid dependent children and provided for unemployment and old age insurance. The last two provisions were staunchly opposed by the AFL which clung to its voluntarism. The result of this act was that a widowed mother might not have to work and could stay home with her ten children. Both men and women did not have to worry about having to beg or starve if unemployed. A notable omission of the Social Security Act of 1935 is that it did not contain a universal scheme for either nationalized medical care or health insurance. Apparently, those in favor of the Social Security Act felt, at the time, that fighting the opposition to such a provision might undermine the whole Act.

To this day, medical care in the United States remains the monopoly of the medical profession and many Americans of all classes, unable to pay high fees, simply do without necessary medical treatment. Those most fortunate in this respect are workers who belong to unions which have good health schemes or those who work from large organizations which pay for expensive health insurance. Women, who most often do not belong to either category, as well as children, the poor and rural residents, suffer the most from the inadequate and unfair distribution of health services.

Conclusion

This historical study of the origins and travails of female blue collar workers in the United States shows us that the present condition of female blue collar workers and, indeed, of women workers in other sectors of the economy, has long historical roots. In this essay I have noted especially how women struggled both to obtain unions and protective legislation so that they could improve working conditions which were generally far worse than those of male workers.

Men who had unions and good working conditions were able to obtain protective legislation, while non-union women workers had a very difficult time obtaining this legislation. In this area women fought two major struggles: an economic one, in their attempt to form unions, and a political one, in their attempt to attain legislation. In the first instance, they had to fight skilled union men who did not want competition from unskilled women, and in the second instance, they were disenfranchised; they had to sway male legislators. Ironically, when women achieved these two goals – unionization (to a limited extent) and protective legislation – both were used as much to keep them from competing with male workers, as to provide benefits for women.

Although sexual discrimination by men against women has always played a large part in women's endeavors – that is, male designation of women as inferior intellectually, physically and even morally – I have tried to link society's notions regarding women to the nature of the family, to ethnic culture and to the exigencies of the labour market. I have stressed especially how the problem of adapting craft unions to an unskilled labour force exacerbated women's problems as a disadvantaged group.

Moreover, it is clear that very few women, themselves, were able to rise above society's limited vision of female potential. Those women who saw the reality of female existence – namely the fact that women have always worked – and those who saw women going beyond traditional female occupations – Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Elizabeth Blackwell, to name a few – fought for the recognition of different aspects of women's existence.

Women, like men, have also been divided by class. Some writers prefer to stress the fact that sex marks women almost as if they were a caste. Others simply note the fact that sometimes sex, sometimes class – depending upon the historical circumstances – emerges as the more important factor. Without settling issues raised by Marxist theory regarding class, it is quite clear that only women have suffered because of their sex.

One of the most interesting findings of this study has been the extent of cooperation between middle-class and working-class women which existed prior to the Thirties. It has led me to speculate whether – especially in the union area – working-class women might not yet be able to draw on the resources provided by middle-class women. I refer not only to financial aid, but to knowledge regarding women's history and organizational and communication skills. There are organizations comprised of female union members, but none include non-union middle class women as the Women's Trade Union League did. In a new coalition similar to the WTUL, middle-class women could also benefit from the perspective a relationship with working-class women could throw on their privileged and – in some ways – equally powerless condition.

As far as women's relationship to unions is concerned, I hope I have dispelled a number of commonplace prejudices. First, that women are disinterested in unions and when interested, scarcely support them. If women are and have been disinterested in unions, it is because unions have not been as beneficial to women as to men. As a last resort, women were allowed to join unions in order to prevent them from becoming scabs (strikebreakers) and undercutting male workers. Union contracts have been signed which, in effect, have written women out; that is, left them at pre-contract rates of pay. Second, as demonstrated in this essay, unions are not the sine qua non of worker protest. Often in the past, women have walked off the job and struck – without the benefit of unions. But where women have been determined to join unions, they have done so against overwhelming odds. Finally, I feel that as the stakes for female union members become as high as those of male union members, their staying power, in terms of supporting unions in good times and bad, will resemble that of men. At present, women union members often find themselves on strike for wages that are scarcely above the minimum.

Another misconception about women in the workforce which I hope I have put to rest, is that the normal condition of women is to remain at home and look after children. Clearly, this is a post-World War II middle-class conception. Women worked in the pre-industrial family; they were the first to enter factories and their productivity on the farm has been noted. For the period this essay covers, I have noted in several places that most women in the workforce worked not for fulfillment, but out of need. The notion that women are "secondary workers" – that is, that they have someone else to support them and are, therefore, earning additional money to be used for luxuries – or that women's needs

are less than men's, that their food, clothing and shelter somehow cost less, is one that goes back to ancient times. Now we have statistics to bear witness to the need married and single women have for their earnings. In addition to need, it has become clear also, that women of all classes, just as men, often like to be members of the labour force. They need the sense of self-respect, which getting a job done and earning money gives them, and they enjoy the social contacts of the workplace. Certainly, today, it should be unnecessary to argue for the "right" of women to work.

Aside from the meaning of work to women just discussed, there is the question of the meaning of women's work in a more academic sense. Does labour force participation for women mean upward mobility, or an added burden to the work women do in the home? In the past, and even for the current period, it is clear that women in the labour force usually do two jobs; for in addition to their paid labour, housework and children are also their responsibility. Historically, the availability of work to women often meant the possibility of keeping their family together or of avoiding prostitution or starvation.

Today, the availability of jobs for women often meant the possibility of keeping their family together, or of avoiding prostitution or starvation. Today, the availability of jobs for women often means a better family diet, better dental and medical treatment or luxuries like cars and vacations. Sometimes, paid work enables a woman to opt for divorce and to get out of an intolerable family situation. The answer is not simple, but I feel that the availability of jobs for women, and even more so, the notion that women can and should do almost any job in society, as opened up the number of options they have and has thus paved the way for potential mobility.

Despite the impact of women's "liberation," young women want emotional attachments which lead (mostly) to marriage and family. Whereas many changes have occurred in the workforce to accommodate women – anti-discrimination laws and maternity leave – changes in the family, if any, have taken place on an individual level. For example, women defer child-bearing or decide not to have any children. Those who cannot so "rationalize" their family life, either forego the advantages of paid labour or suffer from the dilemma of attending to two jobs. It remains for society to introduce definite structural changes, so that children receive the nurturing they need while mothers work without tremendous physical and emotional strain. This is, I feel, the central area of concern; if changes were made in this area, others would follow. Women, having an equal change in the workforce, would, themselves, break down the sexual segregation of the labour market, suffer equal chances of unemployment with men, in time of recession, and gradually earn the same pay as men. A society which tries to equalize work opportunities for women, but makes no changes in the area of sex roles and family, will find that women continue to lag behind in the labour force and suffer great strains, whether they are paid labour or stay at home to tend children.

Specifically what seems to have been learned from this historical study of women workers is that women must change not only specific laws and organizations to benefit themselves, but that in the process of doing so, they must change society's conception of what their role is – what women are to contribute and to receive from society. Historically, it seems that women have made progress in negative ways. Frist, it was felt that women should not be sexually compromised by working in a factory; second, that women should not be forced to turn to prostitution because

of low wages; third, that social welfare might enable women not to work at all. Now it is time for women to be able to live rich, full, creative lives as wives, mothers, workers – to live as people – and not be bound either by biology or ideology to limit their lives to the family.

Footnotes

1. Louise Kapp Howe, *Pink Collar* (New York: Avon Press, 1977) deals with service workers; C.F. Epstein, *Woman's Place* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970) C. Lopate, *Women in Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968) and H.S. Astin, *The Woman Doctorate in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1969) concern professional women. Books about working-class women at work rather than as members of working-class families are appearing more frequently. For example, from England there is Beynon and Blackburn, *Perceptions of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); from the United States, *Nobody Speaks for Me*, N. Seifer, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976). There are many descriptive works dealing with women during the Second World War. However, it would seem that after the initial interest in "Rosie the Riveter," social scientists returned to their preoccupation with male workers, or with professional women, and blue collar women were ignored.

2. Heidi Hartman, Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex, in M. Blaxall and B. Reagan, *Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 137-170. Although even among Marxist writers there is controversy. For example, Heidi Hartman notes that women's subordination with the pre-industrial family has carried over into their subordination in the labour force.

3. Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, *Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1975, pp. 36-64.

4. Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

5. The prevailing view of women in a "service" or post-industrial economy is pessimistic. Harry Braverman, for example, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974) notes the proletarianization of this sector. He notes that it is "Largely non-union and drawing on the pool of pauperized labour at the bottom of the working class population, these industries create new low-wage sectors of the working class, more intensely exploited and oppressed than those in the mechanized fields of production." P. 282. In describing clerical workers in particular, Braverman says, "Clerical workers come increasingly from families of factory background… The chief remaining distinction seems to be a division along the lines of sex… The sex barrier that assigns most office jobs to women, and that is enforced both by custom and hiring practice, has made it possible to lower wage rates in the clerical category, below those in any category of manual labour." P. 253 Daniel Bell in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973) has a more tempered view. He sees the fact that the service sector is growing, while the manufacture sector is shrinking, as a social problem for unions. Unions have begun to organize women in the service industries, he notes, but even so the percentage of union women to women in the labour force has declined. P. 146. Elsewhere he notes that our bureaucratized society is a more communal one where considerations of equality for disadvantaged groups has come to fore. Due to this and due to the "meritocratic" nature of a bureaucratized society women may be able to forge ahead.

 Beyond these views, there are those who still feel that since women are secondary workers – Michel Crozier in

The World of the Office Worker – (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) low pay does not have the same effect on them as it would on men. Also, I would note, that in times of recession and unemployment, women in the labour force have a substantially higher percentage of unemployment than men in the labour force.

6. Heidi Hartmann, op. cit.

7. This is the thesis of Elizabeth Baker in *Technology and Women's Work*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964) Baker is by no means a technological determinist, however. In some cases, a skilled task was divided into a number of simple operations which could then be done by women, and in others, an advance which made work harder, and in still other cases, whether the work was done by men or women was simply decided on the basis of the outcome of a power struggle – not on the basis of technology alone. These points are covered in more detail later in the essay.

8. Just a few examples are as follows: On productivity, Jacob Mincer and Solomon Palachek, "Family Investments in Human Capital: Earnings of women, *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 82, 1974, pp. 76-111. Gary S. Becker has written *The Economics of Discrimination*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) and Janice Fanning Madden, *The Economics of Sex Discrimination*, (Massachusetts: Lexington, 1973). The overcrowding theory was first put forth in 1918 by Millicent G. Fawcett in an article, "Equal Pay for Equal Work," in the *Economic Journal* Vol. 28, pp. 1-6 but has recently been clarified by Barbara Bermann in the *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. 79, 1971, in "The Effect on White Incomes of Discrimination in Employment," pp. 294-313. A good summary article and bibliography can be found in an

article by Francine D. Blau and Carol L. Jusenius, "Economists' Approaches to Sex Segregation in the Labor Market: An Appraisal," in Blaxall and Reagen (eds.) Women and the Workplace (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) pp. 181-200.

9. W. Elliott Brownlees and Mary M. Brownlee, *Women in American Economy: A Documentary History, 1675-1929)* , (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 12.

10. Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy E. Schrom, "Women in American Society: An Historical Contribution," in *Radical America*, Vol. 5, No. 4, July – August, 1971, p. 34.

11. Alexander Hamilton, "Report on Manufacturers," in S. McKee, Jr. (ed.) *Alexander Hamilton on Public Credit, Commerce, and Finance* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957).

12. Both the Brownlees and the *Radical America* article cited above contain excellent descriptions of the early organization of factory work. Whether factory work constituted an upwardly mobile step for women, or simply a substitution of wage slavery for unpaid household work, remains debatable.

13. A modern study of female factory workers, H. Beynon and R. M. Blackburn, *Perceptions of Work*, (Cambridge University Press, 1972) notes that women very often seek factory work for the change to be with other women and that this camaraderie, rather than attachment to trade union, is what produces group loyalty during strikes.

14. Dublin, Thomas, "Women, Work and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills: 'The oppressing Hand of Avarice Would Enslave Us,' *Labor History*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter, 1975, pp. 99-116.

15. Dublin, passim.

16. Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*, (New York: Praeger, 1977) p. 63 ff.

17. Brownlees, p. 159: Dublin, p. 113; and Goldstein, p. 4 (See footnote number 20 for Goldstein) Sarah Bagley was later to attend the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 where she opposed protective labour legislation for women on the ground that it would impede them from competing with men for jobs in the trades.

18. Dublin, and Alice Henry, *The Trade Union Woman*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1915).

19. Wertheimer, p. 82.

20. Mark L. Goldstein, "The Rise of Labor Organizations Among Women in Their Fight for Equal Rights 1820 – 1914", in *Industrial and Labor Relations Form*, Vol. 7, No. 3. 1970-1971, pp. 2-36 and p. 4.

21. Wertheimer, p. 80.

22. Jencks *et al.* in *Inequality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) have tried to dissuade Americans from believing that there is a direct link between income and level of education. Further, recently there has been a most popular

theme amongst social scientists that not only were public schools not a leveling institution, but rather a very potent instrument for social control: Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard, 1968) and David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weaver and Artisans in the Kensington Riots," in Stearns and Walkowitz (eds.) *Workers in the Industrial Revolution*, (N.B., N. J.: Transaction Books, 1974) pp. 44-74. Diane Ravitch, in the Revisionist Revisited, (N.Y.: Basic Book, 1978) disputes the radical thesis.

23. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 71-77.

24. Charles Rosenberg and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," have shown how the growing force of medical thought emphasized women's physical delicacy and how their mental development would compromise their child-bearing capacity. *Journal of American History*, Vol. 60, September 1973, pp. 332-56.

25. During the 1978 Ontario New Democratic Party Convention, an N.D.P. women's group proposed that women workers in such jobs as hairdressing be the subject of special protective labour legislation on the basis that they came into contact with various chemicals likely to harm an unborn child, despite the fact that Ontario has legislation which is supposed to enable any worker, male or female, to refuse, without penalty, to do a job which he feels will damage his or her health. The catch in this legislation is that many workers do not realize the harm done to their health by their working conditions until they are already ill or dying.

26. Goldstein, p. 6.

27. William F. O'Neill, *Everyone was Brave*, (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969), p. 20. The National Woman Suffrage Association had an acute view of women's problems as arising essentially from their sex role. Their extreme bitterness over the Fourteenth Amendment, which gave black men the vote while leaving white women disenfranchised alienated both their former anti-slavery allies as well as labour unions.

28. Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

29. Pelling, Henry, *American Labor,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

30. Cantor and Laurie, Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1977); S. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (New York: Atheneum, 1975).

31. Brownlees, p. 19 ff.

32. Smuts, p. 14.

33. Altbach, E. H., *Women I n America*, 1974.

34. Wertheimer, p. 99 ff.

35. Smuts, p. 18.

36. *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, (Toronto, Educational Press, 1974)

37. Brownlees, p. 21.

38, Brownlees, p. 23.

39. Wertheimer, p. 95 and Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

40. Pelling, p. 13.

41. Claudia Goldin, "Female Labor Force Participation: The Origin of Black and White Differences, 1870-1880, " *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 37, No. 1, March 1977, pp. 87-108.

42. H. Gutman, in *Work, Culture and Society*¸ (New York: Knopf, 1976) tells us of the extent of black and white cooperation in mining and even of black union organizers who worked amongst white miners.

43. In *Worlds of Pain* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) Lillian Rubin repeatedly notes how difficult it is for working-class women to cope with the double burden of housework and a paid job, especially in view of the fact that in the working class, male sex roles militate against husbands helping around the house. Sex roles must have been even more rigid in the period about which I am writing.

44. Pelling, passim.

45. Pelling, passim.

46. Pelling, p. 56. Also, Wolfson, T., *The Woman Worker and the Trade Unions*, (New York: International Publishers, 1926) p. 59.

47. Wertheimer, passim, and Wolfson, p. 62.

48. Keneally, James J., "Women and Trade Unions, 1870-1920: The Quandary of the Reformer," in *Labor History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter, 1973, pp. 42-45.

49. Perlman, passim.

50. Goldstein, passim.

51. Baker, Elizabeth, *Technology and Woman's Work*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

52. Wertheimer, p. 199.

53. Pelling, p. 45 ff. Mary E. Kenney later became M. Kenney O'Sullivan, a founder of the Women's Trade Union League.

54. Wolfson, p. 67 ff.

55. Pelling, p. 45.

56. Wertheimer, p. 200 ff. Ralph Scharnau, "Elizabeth Morgan, Crusader for Labor Reform," *Labor History*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 1973, pp. 340-351.

57. Florence Kelley was later the head of the Consumers' League.

58. The ideological differences separating Gompers from the socialists were as follows: From the outset of the socialists favored industrial unions and a political labour party with a socialist platform while Gompers favoured business unionism. Otherwise, Gompers had been defeated for the presidency of the AFL at the 1894 convention by a socialist faction, although he was reelected the following year. Perlman, Selig, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States,* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1922).

59. William Chafe, *The American Woman, Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Rolls,* 1920-1970, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 54.

60. Gertrude Bancroft, *The American Labor Force*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958).

61. V. K. Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States: Demographic and Economic Factors Governing Its Growth and Changing Composition*, (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1970).

62. John D. Durand, *The Labor Force in the United States*, 1890-1960, (New York: S.S.R.C., 1949).

63. Clarence D. Long, *The Labor Force Under Changing Income and Employment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

64. Oppenheimer, p. 57.

65. Bell, Daniel, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society,* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

66. Oppenheimer, p. 61.

67. Durand, p. 82.

68. The Brownlees, p. 5, Oppenheimer, p.3.

69. Brownlees, p. 32.

70. Brownlees, passim.

71. Altbach, passim.

72. Chafe, p. 52.

73. Altbach, passim.

74. Chafe, passim.

75. Bell, p. 70.

76. Brownlees, p. 5.

77. Brownlees, p. 8.

78. Altbach, p. 60 ff.

79. Gladys Boone, *The Women's Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 74 ff.

80. Perlman, passim.

81. Wertheimer, P. 72.

82. For the early history of trade unions in the United States I have relied heavily on Perlam (1922) and on Pelling (1960). For information on protective labour legislation I have relied to a great extent on Baker, E., *Protective Labor Legislation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) reprinted from the 1925 edition.

83. Wolfson, p. 76. Core making was a case of a certain phrase in a skilled trade being simplified due to the introduction of a new process. Once simplified, women were able to do the job of core making and male apprentices were unable to secure jobs as core makers. What Wolfson does not make explicit is the fact that skilled workers saw no way to fight the introduction of technology which reduced skilled trades to unskilled ones, and instead, turned against women and unskilled workers in general in order to preserve their craft.

84. See Clark Chambers, *Seed time of Reform: American Social Service and Social Action* 1918-1933, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933) pp. 262-7. *Survey* was published by Survey Associates, a group of social reformers, to report and interpret social movements. Chambers' book is an account of voluntary social service organizations and individual reformers in the Twenties and Thirties who furnished the New Deal with ideas and administrators.

85. Wolfson says that the AFL suffered from an unfulfilled wish. It expressed desires for women, for example, a sincere desire to organize them, which it could not carry

out. P. 73. Another way to put it might be that their fear of female competition overcame their best wishes for women and their support of protective legislation was an attempt to offset their guilt.

86. Pelling, p. 119.

87. Wertheimer, p. 122 ff.

88. Flexner, *Protective Labor Legislation*, p. 208 ff.

89. Boone, passim.

90. Boone, p. 62; Goldstein, p. 8.

91. I have relied here on O'Neill. Boone and Wertheimer also discuss the WTUL's relationship with the AFL

92. Chambers, see pp. 23, 29, 37 and elsewhere.

93. Wertheimer, passim.

94. Baker, passim.

95. Both Anderson and Wertheimer tell various aspects of this story but are in agreement.

96. Baker, p. 202.

97. Baker, p. 401 ff.

98. Goldstein, passim.

99. Pelling, p. 159 ff.

100. Banner, W. Lois, *Women in Modern America: A brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, Inc., 1974), p. 181.

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